

OPIUM FOGS

The story is set in a wintry London, in one of those intense companionable villages of it where intellectuals congregate on foggy evenings to drink cheap wine in one another's workrooms. The devilish Dr. Bodo Swingler, full of power, goes prowling round the private views and other parties festering with gossip and contempt.

He has a wife, Bebette, and a rackety household into which comes Gabriella, a sulky little beauty all tawny from her marriage in India. Gerard Plowman, who is a neurotic young librarian, is frantic with love of her. Bebette is voracious, and around the four of them jealousy beats its greedy wings.

In the fogs and frosts, through the lit and rumbling thoroughfares, they stalk each other to strange acts and retributions.

By the same author:

POETRY

Notes on Cafés and Bedrooms

OPIUM FOGS

by

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PUTNAM

42 GREAT RUSSELL STREET
LONDON

PUTNAM & COMPANY LIMITED
42 Great Russell Street · London · WC1
and printed by
The Garden City Press Limited
Letchworth, Hertfordshire

To
Paul Bloomfield

OPIUM FOGS

Chapter I

IN A big dirty street crammed with wet traffic a young man was walking up and down pretending to read the menus in café windows.

The elderly man he was looking for was not in any of these steamy eating-houses.

On the contrary he was just twenty yards up the road sitting out on the pavement under an awning, eating his lunch in the open air—and at that very moment he was quietly going “urr-urr” in his throat, trying to bring up a scratchy little piece of mutton bone.

But it was far too cold for this sort of thing. And the more the elderly man tried to get a grip on his mutton bone, the more the passers-by looked at him with cynical ill-humour: ‘Well, what d’you expect—if you insist on playing the continental well into September.’

The young man was on the point of giving up. His hair was stuck down all over his head from the rain; and the shoulders of his jacket were darkly watered.

Presently he caught sight of his prey, simulated pleasure, and approached:

“Edward! I was hoping I’d see you.”

Down went the mutton chip. There was a moment of pensive mud-brown staring from Edward, but he recollected himself.

"Ah, Gerard, of course. Quite a surprise. Come and join me. What a horrid day, isn't it? I'm afraid we've had the last of the summer." And recalling a film he'd once seen of human stomach acid burning a hole in a carpet, suddenly cheered up. "Well, how are you? How's your mother?"

Now the young man appeared to relax. He sat down, ordered a coffee, and stuck out his splashed trouser legs. Seen at close quarters he had the strong pale features of a malefactor—features which respond only to the highest forms of excitement, and for whom everyday life is the equivalent of sewing mailbags in prison.

But it was obvious he was nervously keyed up. And unless he took care he was going to forget himself, and lean across that coffee table and say exactly what he meant.

He looked about twenty-nine years old, immensely scornful, carried a pocketful of old letters about with him . . . and put into the stirring of his coffee all the weary composure of a true metropolitan, worn out by narrow, accelerated passions.

And then he was chilled right through.

Watching Edward Hankin cutting the strings off his runner beans and laying them out on the edge of the plate, he wondered the old boy didn't freeze to the table. 'Really, his hands are quite blue. And if I'm not mistaken, that was a shiver. If he insists on trying to keep himself young by ignoring the seasons, he'll end up a

positive snowman. Oh God, why can't we go indoors and talk properly.'

Hankin was celebrated as an international nobody. He had shaken hands with everyone of importance in Europe, and now lived like an outsize pussycat in three velveteen boxes in Chelsea. Like all English continentals he was a little too well dressed to be well bred. In a word, he was dressy; there was always something wrong with his lapels. Caught unawares, he would be wearing a distinctly common tie, with a sheen on it like mackerel. In fact he had one on today.

All he wanted at the moment was to be told that Gerard's mother, who was younger than himself, was not too well—actually tottering on her last legs, had had a fall that very morning. . . .

"She's not too well," said Gerard.

"Ha! I'm sorry to hear that. A lot of my old friends have been ageing very fast just lately. It's because life today is so noisy. You know Stravinsky was the only composer who made your old collie bark."

Gerard could barely conceal his irritation. 'Suppose I come right out with it?'

Hankin sat up suddenly. His attention was attracted by something across the road.

There is no better entertainment, when you're stone cold and bored to death, than watching someone park a motor-car. The effect is therapeutic, wonderfully reviving.

"Look out!" said Hankin gamely, taking part. "Hullo, someone's going to get stuck."

He stood up, ready to scoff at next to nothing.

"Sorry, what did you say? Good heavens, they'll never get a thing like that in!"

The young man made a gesture of abdication.

He leant an elbow on the table, propped up his sodden head, and refused with stupendous ill-will to look at anything at all.

Whatever it was he wanted from the older man, he certainly wasn't going out of his way to be pleasant. On the other hand there was something reassuring about the extreme naturalness of his behaviour. If you are out to borrow money or ask a favour, nothing puts your victim on guard more rapidly than laughing at his jokes and generally making yourself agreeable. It gives him the jitters on the spot. Possibly Gerard was counting on his resentful expression, and the way his hand came well out of its striped business-cuff and drummed itself on the table, to gain precisely the effect he wanted. He was managing his mouth as though considering abuse into the bargain. He must have wanted it dreadfully badly, the favour he was after, to go to so much trouble.

How moist the air was! Exactly as though the weather was being made round the corner in a laundry where vats of soapy water were standing about, and flannel blankets were being slowly wrung out. An important blast of cabbage hit the thoroughfare from a restaurant kitchen.

This was a fashionable quarter; all the women had the heads of grimy little ballerinas who urgently needed sponging down.

Luckily things were not so bad under their canvas awning. They had some privacy, and managed to set up their own values. Both men had the bad good manners and the fine skin of a leisurely upbringing; in the ordin-

any way they would have been going through the farce of sounding one another on the arts, like two old quacks with wooden stethoscopes. As it was of course they had to give a certain amount of their attention—and even the young man did this—to staring back at the crowd as nastily and as patronizingly as their class permitted. In return they were made to feel the ironic pity of the hundred or so people who passed.

Hankin, who remained standing, was rather spoiling the balance of power by shouting things out and then putting a hand on his stomach to calm it down.

With all that pink flesh he looked like nothing so much as a caterer, an eater of stale birthday-cakes, fearlessly enjoying life in spite of periodic fits of acidosis.

"Nonsense, you can do it!" he cried. And without shame he uttered the frightful words: "*Left hand down!*"

Gerard was immediately convinced he was putting it on. He rose up, blazing.

"No, no, no," said Hankin, turning round with the utmost friendliness, "I can see you're angry. Now do stop glaring at me and looking like death warmed up. My dear boy, of course I want to hear your news. You mustn't mind my taking an interest in what's going on around me!"

And he extended a pair of small bold hands with a shiny little nail on every finger, and pushed the young man down into his chair—looking at him reproachfully, but still laughing on a bit to show that his gaiety was authentic. 'What an opinion you have of yourself,' said his smile, 'why, you're literally trembling with rage!'

"Now you must admit," he even patted the loth

shoulders which promptly shrank away under his hand, "there's a funny side to a monster of a thing like that. Just because it's in such deadly earnest!"

Consider what was taking place.

A hearse, complete with coffin and undertakers, had laboriously backed itself into a space directly opposite.

Several factotums in black were already unloading the coffin. These undertakers were great big fellows in waisted coats; they looked as if they read nothing but obituary notices, and dined exclusively on bread and water and soapflakes. They were exactly the sort who could be relied on to get on with the job without breaking into a trot the moment your back was turned. You could see that they were perfectly well able to handle armfuls of plastic flowers without snapping off the rose petals, or suddenly smiling to themselves. Nothing could have been more proper.

What made it, in a way, very slightly humorous was the fact that they all walked as if they had hernias. But it was much too late to start thinking of another profession now.

Hankin had tired himself out, and sat down in high spirits. .

"So your mother's not so well—ha-ha. I shouldn't worry too much. We've all got to go sooner or later, you know. I don't mind telling you," very engaging, and breathing hard into Gerard's face, "the sight of a coffin always puts me in a good humour. It's all I can do sometimes to stop myself rushing up and rapping on it with my knuckles, and calling out something perfectly idiotic: 'Hullo—in there. Bad luck! Bad luck, I say!' It makes the air smell so sweet."

He ventilated strongly from either nostril. And drew in fresh supplies for all he was worth.

Gerard said abruptly :

"There was something I wanted to ask you."

Hankin looked terribly alarmed.

"Stick to your guns, over there!" he called out sharply, as though the funeral contractors were being ousted, or were not taking life seriously after all but were showing signs of irresponsibility, indulging in tasteless high jinks and merely joy-riding about for the sake of it.

And instantly ordered himself an apricot tart, falling upon the pastry as if by filling his own mouth he could prevent Gerard from getting anything out.

"Please!" He held up his hand when the young man drew a breath and lifted up his head cold-bloodedly. . . . "My dear boy, directly I've finished, tell me everything. No, I insist. I can see you're in a mood when you're not to be trifled with."

It was obvious to him that Gerard must be prevented at all costs from expressing himself. 'If I give him half a chance he'll put his whole soul into a tuppenny-ha'penny conversation—it's damned offensive,' thought Hankin, who got on very nicely without a soul and saw no point in starting one at the last moment.

He went on making narrow-minded pettifogging comments like a female relation :

"Apparently noise is very bad for you when you're eating. My old friend Dr. Swinger told me—he wouldn't eat a mouthful even with a dog going yap-yap outside the window. Certainly not. You remember the Swingers?"

"Just."

"Oh they're very much alive still!" And he couldn't help thinking that Gerard looked like one of those sardonic undertaker fellows—as though he'd been stricken internally somewhere, and ought to change his profession before it was too late.

This is exactly how a man appears when he has been holding a certain sentence intact against the mainstream of a conversation for fifteen minutes.

Hankin said :

"What a household eh? Whew! Of course she's a damned outrageous flirt. But then he's not what I'd call a stable person—always writing down 'Rome' or 'Hong-kong' on scraps of paper."

"Quite."

"He goes upstairs to get a coat, and comes down without one. Just because there's a young girl staying in the house."

"Odd."

"To tell you the truth the whole menage is just a bit slummy. I don't like to see a fully grown woman emptying a chamberpot at eleven o'clock in the morning."

"Who does."

"It's not the sort of place for Gabriella to come back to on her own. But what can one do?" He brought out a decent old wallet with a touch of grease on it like a fat woman's neck, and began leafing through soft sheets of money rapidly in public.

This was an impressive act of malice. For the young man was obliged to look away and hold his tongue—such is the power of paper money—as though Hankin was doing something as private and indecent as emptying a chamberpot at an improper hour.

Nothing could have suited Gerard better.

There was some red disturbance of his countenance. Pleasure showed itself hotly, and was at once frowned off. He reassembled his limbs: "Thanks, old Tabby!" He seemed to have dried off suddenly; his coat fitted him. But there are certain men to whom unhappiness adds a touch of magnificence; without it, they appear almost commonplace. At that moment you would have had difficulty in singling out Gerard, but for the fact that he was still sitting at the table with his tormentor, and eyeing him with an unnatural friendliness.

Hankin, really peeved over his wallet ("Don't tell me your thoughts—you boring boy!") fussed and counted.

Gerard said obligingly:

"So you think she's a damned outrageous flirt?"

"Who?"

"Mrs. Swingler."

"Well, well. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*, you know!" And finding the temptation too great: "In fact I've often wondered if she hadn't got Armenian blood in her?"

Hankin waited submissively; is there anything more satisfying than to be told that someone you've always suspected of having Armenian blood in them, *has* Armenian blood in them?

"Or Maltese," said Gerard decisively. "I should say you've hit the nail on the head there."

"Oh, d'you think so? Armenian or Maltese? Yes, I'm afraid you may be right."

"Those brandy-ball eyes . . ."

"But dash it all, he plays her up you know!"

'What an old blackguard you are,' thought Gerard, 'You've no sooner gluttoned yourself on her Armenian

blood than you're ready to tell me I've gone too far.'

"Well . . ."

"Oh come now!" Hankin put down his wallet sternly. "Every time I go round there he's blown a fuse and is crawling around in the dark with one of the female students, looking for bits of wire."

"If you put it like that! But does he still practice medicine?"

"He never has practised. That is the whole point. They make up their income out of paying guests. And he sells those antiques of his. You can't put your foot inside the door without his trying to sell you something."

"That sort of thing can be embarrassing."

"Embarrassing!" Hankin's feelings got the better of him: "How dare he try to sell me a second-hand invalid carriage with three forward gears! And I can tell you the thing positively stank!"

Obviously this incident had been rankling for months. He was bristling up even now, and went on with feeling:

"Is that the way to make money—by insulting your friends? Well, is it? If it comes to that, I know which of us will be needing it first. Of course it's pathetic, at the rate he's going downhill. I'm keeping my fingers crossed from day to day."

Gerard had been growing steadily more jovial and communicative. He said freshly:

"I must say you look perfectly fit to me."

For the first time Hankin seemed to lose confidence.

"I've never felt better."

Gerard was deeply interested.

"You know, you must have an iron constitution. You

look after yourself. And—without being rude—you're very self-contained as a person. It all helps."

Hankin gazed at him with extreme distaste. This makes offensive hearing at any age; after sixty it is so disagreeable that Hankin's first impulse was to clap on a panama hat and make a run for it. He particularly disliked the admiring stare that accompanied the words. 'Don't look at me as if I'm going to jump up and dance a gavotte!'

He pushed aside his coffee cup with an enfeebled little movement . . . a man with very few reserves. What a cold day it was after all. No good hanging on to summer any longer.

"My dear Gerard, I must be going. I'm glad I've been able to take you out of yourself a bit," in a faint voice; drained, ready to give up the ghost. One must remember that Hankin found it extremely difficult to be with anyone for longer than twenty minutes: he had worked out a foolproof theory by which he hoped to make himself more attractive. 'When I am with my friends, each of them is despising me because I have time to be with him; whereas he would otherwise envy the others my company.' For a man whose profession is knowing people, he appeared to have set himself an impossible task; and compromised by always being on the point of leaving.

He added:

"I know you won't be offended if I tell you that when you arrived I thought I'd have to put a warming-pan under you—or apply artificial respiration!"

By now he was simply not strong enough to take the full force of the young man's prompt and laughing

acknowledgment; and turned away. Besides that sickly leer down there under his nose was extremely tiring to hold.

"Nonsense. Piffle. Not a bit."

Gerard had by no means finished with him :

"... you're quite right, I *am* too much wrapped up in myself. But there's not much I miss. I saw just what you meant about those ludicrous removal men, those funeral directors in their frock-coats! I must admit they put the fear of God into me too, with their manic-depressive tread round the death-box; and that hint of gaiters! They really do look as if they're packing away bodies at a rate of knots."

Hankin had had enough, and looked at him through a chink.

Gerard said :

"Honestly, one loses one's sense of humour about death. I didn't realize that you were trying to keep a straight face, but that all the time you were in stitches!... You were absolutely right to ignore me. I've been behaving badly." And then a disarming finale, so English in its offensive sincerity : "Thanks for putting up with it." ·

Hankin recorded the blow. He dimly apprehended that he had lost, and that the stakes had been large. In an effort to recoup his fortunes he wavered for a moment, and then took the risk :

"By the way, wasn't there something you wanted to ask me?"

Gerard stamped gently in a water puddle. He depicted embarrassment. In a flash all Hankin's worst fears were confirmed. Idiot! He could have stuffed the ill-omened

sentence back into his mouth and gagged himself with it like a sock, and not spoken for an hour.

He was made to feel he had stumbled on some domestic trouble of unbelievable depth and secrecy. Gerard skimped nothing: the clotted opening was followed by a plucking up of courage that was masterly.

"The fact is . . . I was going to ask you . . . whether you could possibly lend me twenty-five pounds? Not for long," he said hastily, so as to create an atmosphere of extreme instability in which the lender counted the minutes until he was paid back, "just until the end of the month." Putting the whole affair on the most impoverished basis, so that they faced one another like two clerks without a bank account between them.

Never had Edward Hankin felt so poor and empty. If he were to put together all his worldly possessions then and there, you felt that they would hardly make up a bundle. He was an old man, his wants were few, and he had always lived frugally within his means, keeping body and soul together. Now he felt that his resources were being stretched beyond their limits; they were being made to bear a strain that he, personally, would never have thought of putting on them. And he felt indignant on their behalf.

His answer was troubled and heartfelt.

"I wish I could." He braced himself as though facing up to overwhelming odds. "As it is, you've caught me at a bad moment I'm afraid."

Hankin sighed, and glanced down at his wrists with the wry courage of a man who has been wearing brass cuff-links ever since the last budget.

"Believe me, if I had it . . ." He joined together a

fierce smile and a decent rush of breath down the nose; grim, forbearing humour at his own afflictions. If ever a man were in need of twenty-five pounds, it was self-evident that here he sat. He had intended to keep it to himself; if there was anything he detested it was to be pitied. What made it especially ironic was the fact that twenty-five pounds was almost exactly the sum that could have put him to rights . . . perhaps Gerard . . . ?

Gerard, in dread of a great sob of laughter, was already relenting. But he couldn't resist trying to pay for his coffee.

To his joy Hankin exceeded all expectations; he turned it into a favour of the first magnitude :

"Pay for your coffee? Certainly not. Are you going to take away one of the few pleasures left to an old fogey?" Mad, reckless fool !

No, Gerard could shout down a megaphone or hold him up at the point of a gun, those were exactly the things which were calculated to bring out the best in him. He would resist the price of that coffee up to the end.

For a moment Gerard felt almost uncomfortable.

The wallet lay on the table between them. Hankin took it up with great firmness, extracted a ten shilling note and scrutinized it anxiously as though he had just run it off on a hand press and could easily have smudged it or mis-spelled the name of the chief cashier.

This wound up the interview. They separated; Hankin scudding in amongst the *hoi polloi* with a wonderful lightness of foot.

Almost instantaneously the coffin-bearers emerged at a run, slammed the back doors of the hearse, and board-

ing their vehicle keenly, drove off in the same direction at top speed.

Gerard returned to his place of employment.

It was the season of perpetual late afternoon when the rain lands on the pavement as though dripping through from a floor above. The streets darken like drawing-rooms full of black furniture. Clouds, dirty beauties aloft, have long ago shed the last of the peacock dew.

You move along drowning in your thoughts.

On all sides are the magnificent new citizens who return from cosmic hours abroad and live with flair and elegance, inexorably, for two or three days.

In places the Metropolis has the depth of a glass of water. There are sheets of strong north light, on the slope.

But the emotional fatigue of being a Londoner begins with the first downpour and the first intellectual who brings out of his boot-locker an idea as toxic as a bag of dust.

Gerard shouted to the city :

“Gabriella !”

And immediately heard his mother’s voice in his inner ear : “Do you think that because she is married and because she is convalescent, I am going to tell you how unsuitable she is for you ?” uttered as a reproach.

‘No, my dearest mother, I do not. For my sake you would melt any convention. You want me to emerge unscathed. But it’s hopeless. I shall never learn from experience; I have too much imagination. You’re quite right to be afraid that I shall make some fatal mistake

in my life through an inability to grasp realities. I shall : if I have the courage.' In return he could distinctly hear his mother comfort herself with : "I know that you can bear any responsibility in the world except that of arranging your own life." *Astute woman.*

Gabriella !

This young woman had married and left England a moody little beauty of twenty-two; eighteen months in India, ten of them paralysed, would have left their mark.

'Suppose that she has changed physically beyond all recognition?' he asked the air. This was a thought comparable to the suicide who while attempting to drown himself finds that he has accidentally floated into shallow water, and kicks off for the deeps again with : 'It no longer matters whether she's beautiful or intelligent or good company : no, every satisfactory reason for which one ought to love a woman has been lost sight of on the racetrack. It simply has to be *she*.'

Among the letters in his pocket was a passenger list from a steamship company; the line which contained the young woman's name had been marked. He referred to it throughout the day; touched the print with his mouth; was ready to disintegrate when he turned up the wrong page and did not instantly catch sight of it. The resolution to go to Southampton when the boat docked had already formed.

These passenger lists have the appearance of pages out of a cheapjack dictionary—the sort which always looks as though it must be full of common words.

Replacing it in his pocket for the fiftieth time Gerard thought : 'The only woman with whom I could ever have lived, and for whom there was any reason to live.

And she chose boredom, monotony, and middle-class morality. (Morality is always middle-class, old fashioned, and completely up to date.) How in Heaven's name can one fight a hymn and a box of underwear? Never underestimate the empty churches.

'Oh, I sympathize with the man who is choosing a wife and wants a girl well versed in the conventions, so that she will know exactly which ones it is correct to reject as conventional.

'But for *me* to be delivered up to these idiotic home-brewed moralities—by the one woman in the world I thought beyond them!'

He faltered, as though he was going to make the tremendous effort required to break a hypnotic trance, and one which would leave all his senses bleeding and smarting. But succumbed again at once, and ascended the worn steps of the library, fatally stricken internally, his condition inoperable.

Gravely miscast as a librarian, he spent his days dispensing books in surroundings gritty with London dust; and his nights playing the rake. 'I can't bow and scrape my way through life. If I'm to spend the day in purgatory, I might as well give my fate a helping hand by spending the night at some bar queueing up for Limbo.'

It is common knowledge that libraries are the haunt of ragamuffins. Gerard contended with a thoroughly bad lot of down-at-heel has-beens, who came in ostensibly for books, but immediately set about a number of other activities. Their primary aim being to get into conversation with him, in order to tell jokes; or rid themselves of part of their education. They employed all the coquetry of a society woman trying to flirt with her doctor. The

whole miserable shame-faced business of getting books was nothing more than a cover for this facetious sniggering, and these beastly confidences. But should one of their number join them in the library, then they immediately started avoiding him, just in case he should think (quite correctly) that they wished to make his acquaintance, pick his brains, and find out what sort of friends he had.

They pottered, they shuffled, they scratched themselves, and in the long run they took away something rather inferior for their wives, and sat up all night reading it and chuckling out loud.

From this Gerard obtained a living of eleven hundred a year, and found it convenient to remain in his mother's house.

When he was paid he would say to himself : 'Here's a guinea and a pat on the back for living.'

Chapter II

ON THE morning the boat was due he rose at dawn with the labourers and the millionaires.

Entering the world at five o'clock a.m. is like breaking into a church deliberately through a window of precious glass. One has to be something of a profligate to intensify the feeling of sacrilege.

The streets and courtyards were radiant, as if scrubbed out with jewels.

And the winds, silent over a globe rocked by transparent seas.

'So much for the dream,' thought Gerard, 'now for the reality by which you stand or fall.'

He rejected his townclothes. 'She'll be among a holiday-making crowd, all in elegant turnouts. I shall appear like a cringing undertaker, in a costume heavy as a rook. What about a bow tie? No, that smacks of the up and coming architect or one of those odd country bumpkins who inexplicably run the Royal Academy. Very well; the inevitable jacket of Scottish tweed. It's a mistake to dress to well on railways stations, etc. Much better to look patched-up and dictatorial.'

The train journey was exactly as he would have had it. Napkins had been laid over the rough bolsters where the passengers' heads were to buffet. The compartment filled with the most ordinary people, who at once cast sidelong glances at one another, full of curiosity and alarm.

An iron hurdy-gurdy handle let into the partition wall made sure the heat was intolerable, while an aperture at the top of the window pelted them with grime.

They rattled across England through the multi-coloured meadows, the meadows which never stop breeding immense champagne-coloured butterflies!

'This is historic,' thought Gerard, 'people have been sitting here speechless, steaming, and encrusted with grit for well over a century so as not to offend the memory of Stephenson; and our passion for putting the front parlour on wheels rounds off the misery to perfection!'

He got out in high good humour. A sea breeze struck him. All trivial considerations fell away. 'Now!'

He was completely unprepared for the spectacle of a great liner coming in to berth.

The sea murmured and was level as though razed by crystal mowers.

The clouds were at one end a little burnt where they lodged toward the tropics; and at the other, wet as cut flowers where their roots had been severed in England—Gravity, with both his elbows sunk in stoups of water-cress, had only just let them go.

The earthbound spectators had the freedom of vast sheds, panelled with glass. Only when they approached certain pens constructed of wooden hurdles were they repulsed by men in uniform.

Meanwhile the massive seafarer bore down on them, at one moment in the most profound silence, and at the next stopping their ears with the deafening brasses of its funnels.

Presently the whole world quivered: the monster touched the wharf broadside. The screws reversed, and lay basting themselves in sea milk.

One saw that it had the depth of an iceberg. Waters tumbled out from a hole in its side, which still hummed and dripped as it settled.

Gerard was carried away by these trumpeting and manoeuvrings as the plated bulk turned upon a dagger of a prow. He went forward and leaned against some railings in the open; the whiteness of the ether made him blunder. The world appeared to be turning in a bath of phosphorous.

He scrutinized the decks; brine cake iced his lids. The horizon was ablaze with shimmering liquid. He dared not move.

Some people were going aboard!

He left his post instantly.

'Have you a pass?'

Passes must be obtained in advance: naturally. He stood there fuming, too angry to bribe the man.

'I am out of my element and have no confidence in myself. Here's a lemon-faced obstacle who no doubt eats, loves, and weeps, when he's off duty. Like me, he's a menagerie keeper who's lost respect for his animals because they are human.'

He returned and fell into conversation with the lemon-faced customs officer, who was turning his plump moody countenance from ship to shore, prepared for the worst.

"They'll be off any minute now," he said gloomily, with a violent diagonal glance seaward; meaning to say there was no way of putting a stop to it, much as he'd like to.

And :

"What did I tell you?" with suppressed ferocity, as the first of the plain-clothes barbarians began to descend with their germs and their swag.

'That's the voice of a fanatic,' thought Gerard. 'It's peculiar to the English coast: though as a rule it's indoors shouting "one no trump" over a card table.'

The rank and file behind him were beaming and smiling. He felt the germination and emulsion of such a welcome on his own mouth. 'My God, I'm like plebeian yeast—cooked on sentimentality!'

In a frenzy of impatience he read and erased each figure as it appeared on the gangway.

'I can't stand much more of this. It's like the agony of a London night when a barrel organ turns your rotting, spotted soul—you're exposed, and have to start living all over again!'

He caught sight of a young woman who was slowly descending behind an elderly man in a country hat of mossy velours.

'I can't be sure with that insane hat bobbing up and down . . . the outline is familiar, of course she's much thinner and shorter than I remember,' and half-fainting with disappointment, 'Ah, she has lost her looks through that ghastly illness. I shall support her and carry her belongings as though nothing had happened. I love you, my sickly goddess.'

He was standing in the shadow of a large crate which

had been dumped under cover, and drew back in order to select the moment when he should emerge.

'It's not her at all!' The old illness at once began to thrash inside his breast. 'How could I have confused her with this woman—who's carrying one of those terrible umbrellas, about the size of a small pine-tree, and looks as though she'd run you through with the ferrule at the word "go". And that messy bag, a perfect mass of leather thongs, why, its like a section of a boa-constrictor which is digesting a goat, and shedding a skin at the same time.'

By an odd coincidence it turned out that she was the owner of the very crate by which he had taken shelter. She came up to inspect and poke it with her umbrella.

'Vile woman,' thought Gerard. 'Be off, damn you!'

She insisted upon walking round and round it, peering in through the slats.

At the same time he was not a little grateful to her for his mistake. And now that she meant nothing to him he eyed her complacently, as if they were both party to the same joke.

To his horror she at once transferred her interest from the crate to himself. 'Oh, she thinks I'm a bonus thrown in with her ticket!'

As soon as she began to speak the cranes set up the most infernal din. He was obliged out of politeness to lean toward her to catch what she was saying. And she, who so obviously had nothing at all to say, to shout it at the top of her voice.

He felt like throwing up his arms in despair. 'I have waited eighteen months for this, and here I am ground down by a series of bureaucratic irritations, culminating

in a shouting match with a thrusting tart with an umbrella.'

'Hasn't experience taught you,' he replied jeering at himself, 'that your fate will undoubtedly take this opportunity to smuggle Gabriella through your life, and out again?'

He found her instantly, not thirty feet away, standing perfectly still in the *mêlée*.

At such a moment the head bends toward its object, and the throat brings up from the depths its triumph—in which is contained the thirsty groan of a pearl diver as he raises the clenched fist of booty with which he intends to break surface.

The adored Gabriella.

She was wearing a cotton shirt, too light for the weather, the collar starched to porcelain. The small face, brown, with mercury running under lashes freshly inked—and still the truant's mouth where one ate the greenest of kisses!

At the hairline, simplicity a thousand times more powerful than his imagination had worked a trick which took his breath away. Some stuff that blazed as though it slumbered in honey had been drawn back from her brows, and for the sake of expediency had been knotted into a single plait which fell down over one shoulder in a soft rope of warm bullion.

'That . . . should have been prohibited. I am not strong enough to fight Nature when she goes out of her way deliberately to seduce me.

'Who's the unctuous creature prancing round her in a white mackintosh?'

Consider his stupefaction at recognizing Dr. Swinger

whom he had left in London not twenty-four hours ago, with his feet in carpet slippers propped up on a hassock!

'But he must have mobilized his resources the very instant I left him, got himself up in a fancy mackintosh, sprayed his jaws with eau-de-Cologne, and posted on down here! Presumably he was among those who went aboard: as a foreigner he would be perfectly versed in our machinations and documents.

'The question is: does the old devil guess why I spent three-quarters of an hour going over his collection of antiques and flattering his wife? If he suspects, I shall be compelled to become the fortunate possessor of the wife or of a Louis commode; since everything in this affair must appear natural from the outset! So long as I am the pawn of circumstances which happen to have placed me in the framework of Gabriella's life, she'll accept that without question. But as a pestering outsider . . . God help me!

'In that case, why risk coming down here?

'I should have had the advantage of absolute surprise! Provided an occurrence is sufficiently extraordinary, it's the most natural thing in the world.

'But what a delicious young pirate she makes, this suburban housewife of mine!'

The Doctor was bullyragging porters. He wore a black beret, crammed low, that worked with his brows; frowned terribly, and bit his lips. A tin trunk was hoisted and borne off.

He bickered and coaxed Gabriella toward the exit where his car was parked. At one moment he gave the impression that he was going to lift her bodily from the ground. No, evidently he thought better of it. And

contented himself with taking her arm and leaning heavily upon it.

When she began to walk one saw that she went slowly as though one leg was very tired.

'Filthy, abominable country!' said Gerard. 'So this is how the world domesticates a beautiful animal—by breaking her legs!'

A thought so horrible that it sent his hand up to his brow; as though he had suffered a severe electrical shock and felt that it must have whitened the roots of his hair.

'Well, are you going to break in?'

A three-cornered conversation all the way back to London? Out of the question; everything would be killed stone dead. 'Besides how could I look at the Doctor with any appearance of normality, when every instinct tells me that he requires kicking downstairs?'

He returned to London, ugly with jealousy.

In the old phrase his nose was 'out of joint'.

On the way up to his room, he passed his mother. Both terrified of sentiment they went by at a run with muttered excuses.

He was instantly refreshed as though he had drunk clean water. 'Thank heavens I am no match for the Swingers of this world. I have had the misfortune to be in daily contact with a woman of fastidious courtesy.'

There was sour humour in this; for Swinger's wife had greeted him twenty-four hours ago with the words: "And who is this pale anarchist? Do you know you look as if you slept with knives and revolvers under your pillow?"

'So that apparently I keep it well hidden!' said Gerard. 'In that case there's every hope that the wife found me congenial. If not, she's very exacting. I was

literally bowled over by her attractions. She can't be more than forty-six, but she really has gone out of her way to make things difficult for me by painting and dressing with the inspired vulgarity of a lumpish old member of the aristocracy.'

He threw himself across the bed. His limbs were at once drugged by a delicious exhaustion, he floated free inside them, wide awake. Cut off from the outside world his soul set to like a glutton on his fancies. The senses may covet and intrigue but they answer to a morality, whereas the soul is a buccaneer, coarse and sulky, innocent of morality, whose sole concern is the gratification of appetite (for love, for gods, for toys, for immortality).

'She is here in London. By now she will be unpacking and going about her room stiffly like some bronze prince-ling who has hurt himself playing games.

'Are you going to tell me that she can look out of the window without thinking of me? The stolen hours, madness, nostalgia, fog. . . . I taught her to despise every action that was limited and mediocre, in a word, civilized! And succeeded only in laying for her the foundations of a life of boredom. Why, if I had been an English mother complete with tea-bell and riding crop I could not have married her off more quickly. Fool! utter fool! You had the audacity to offer her a way of life,' by now he was lying rigid, with a gleam of acid on his lips, 'instead of a bank-book, prospects, and the word "husband"'.
band''.

'This time I shall win her at the high table of vulgarity, in a game of poker. You go miles out of your way to look at a view which is beautiful, and yet you won't take the most ordinary trouble to live the only part of life

which is not flat and monotonous . . . simply because you jib at an entrance fee.

‘But look at the extraordinary lengths to which you will go to make yourself unhappy!’

Gerard was well acquainted with the terrible yellow Sundays when the whole of Soho smells as though it has been wiped with the same sink cloth, and one walks East—to the pirate heart of the old water-city, when the tide is low and the Thames has one shoulder bare and covered with cold blue swamp grease.

‘And I hurry through the day which has no promise and is filled with boring people, and boring things to do . . . in order to enjoy to the full the greater agony of leisure. I’m like a convict who comforts himself while he’s out breaking stones, with the promise of an evening spent oiling and polishing his fetters!’

‘If only I could bring myself to set up house with a second-best!’

‘What—exchange this fertile core of unhappiness for anything so mean as contentment? Life has an edge once more! The city is young!’

A man who has acquired the habit of reflection is at the gravest disadvantage in love. He must at all costs subdue the habit, which he had spent a lifetime developing for altogether different purposes, but which in this instance becomes a deadly poison, paralysing his faculties and threatening health and sanity.

And so he invents things for himself to do, from changing a tie to going for an eight-mile walk (visits to the cinema in this condition are distinctly low), to stop the gaps in his life—of which he would undoubtedly take advantage.

Measures which may be considered as effective as throwing a silk cushion at a burglar.

The following evening Gerard was dressing suitably in order to go and call upon Swinger and his wife Belette.

He was early, and approached at a strolling pace that disreputable piece of Hampstead—a dirty hundred yards of roadway off the main thoroughfare—which is still alive up to seven o'clock at night with shops open for the sale of soused herring, bread at blood-heat, and left-wing magazines; it has the impudence to copy life in all the great capital cities of Europe. In summer there are actually people sitting about on chairs—abominable.

Swinger rented a tall house filled with wooden staircases. You could hear people going up and down all night, talking in low voices.

While he—who practised the art of the international shopping-bag—was to be found brooding on a huge semi-dirty bed, bald, and smothered in newspapers. His eyelids drooping over his half-finished life.

His manners were always too good: thickly varnished with sincerity they ruined his chances of being taken at his word. Also very damning, he had a fine brown eye, full of wine.

He received his friends in Belette's studio on the first floor.

Gerard was relieved to find the room half-full, since his invitation had been vague and he was uncertain of his welcome.

Some twenty people were shouting at one another

through heavy smoke. There was a striking degree of animation on every face; a sure sign of an exchange of banalities. Swearing was compulsory. The floor which was uncarpeted, reverberated like the stamping ground of a barbarian horde.

Vast canvases stood primed and ready. Others represented mucilage on the overalls of a garage mechanic. There were small drawings all crosses like a witty old woman's hand.

He was received as a familiar: and his pity was at once aroused by the sight of Bebette in an over-blouse of lettuce-green velvet. To avoid howling with mirth at the extraordinary figure she cut he said to himself with compassion:

'These women painters have a great deal to put up with. What an appalling legacy the fine arts leave in their wake.'

He paid her the most extravagant attentions, and watched the door like a hawk.

'Suppose she has gone to bed early? Or has not been invited?'

But he had already learnt enough about his condition to be able to prescribe for it: 'Anything is preferable to sitting at home poring over seductive manœuvres until your hand shakes.'

At half-past nine he said to himself: 'Two minutes more and I shall lose the appetite of a lifetime!'

Gabriella appeared in the doorway. She was immaculate; and her air of tranquillity in the face of danger was an affront.

Half the room turned round to glare at her. The man beside him bristled visibly. An icy gloom settled upon

these people who not ten seconds ago had been as mad as pigs.

Gerard felt as though he was being paid *in gold* for all his disappointments.

'Vain as a peacock, and tender as asparagus—I'll have her if it kills me!'

He moved deliberately and caught her eye.

She tottered as though she had met the Devil head on. And Bebette took her into one of those heavily scented embraces which seem to go on for ever, and in which two women struggle for supremacy in public.

'I must address her casually. If possible after an animated conversation with someone else.'

Chapter III

NO NEED to enumerate the cloying dialogues which were taking place all over the room. History had come full circle, and the name of Delacroix was again passing reverently.

Gerard had taken the trouble to be well-informed; so that he was credited with a diabolical aptitude for bringing the conversation round to his own subject.

Several painters found themselves talking to a librarian—as if he was an equal!

The moment Gabriella was alone, he left them abruptly and went up to her.

She was nervous and very much on her guard. Neither of them had the least idea of what they were saying.

In despair, and with Swinger imminent, he said:

“Listen, I believe there is some food in that kitchenette over there. Come out for a minute so that we can talk.”

Terrified of a snub he turned on his heel.

Manners are always impressive when they are worn over a keen irritability, like an interesting scabbard on a very sharp sword.

Gabriella, who had never stopped trembling, would

have refused outright, but Swingler appeared and wounded her on the neck with his moustache.

"You are trembling like a leaf" (this man missed nothing). To put her at ease he began to run down his guests. "These are all Bebette's friends. I have no time for them."

He turned over her plait as though he was considering buying it. ('She has been spoilt. I would like to shake all the breath out of her body!')

"My poor child, you have been very ill. But it is good for you to have a little social life. I will take you for a walk in the afternoons."

He gently bit and kissed the end of her plait. As though at a given signal, a bell at once began to ring from the other side of the room, and he was obliged to excuse himself.

The explanation of this was, paradoxically, in the finest English tradition.

The Doctor found people insupportable after ten o'clock at night. He let off alarm clocks, had himself called on the telephone, and ran down their favourite authors in the most biting phrases he could call to mind; and was altogether so entertaining that his guests congratulated themselves on staying for the performance, and on not having gone home at the hour they had originally intended.

Now there is some justification, for, provided there is no compulsion on him to remain and he is if anything a little unwelcome, a painter feels he can sit down and relax for a period of, say, five hours—without actually damaging his reputation of wild man and vagabond.

He requires to feel sufficiently at home to misconduct

himself publicly. The twentieth-century studio is therefore a combination of soup kitchen and circus ring.

It goes without saying that the lack of an inferiority complex is a serious disadvantage.

This deviation is necessary to stress the fact that in a roomful of people Gabriella could not find a soul who would speak to her.

She was suffering from shock; she was mesmerized by the door of the little kitchenette; she was urgently in need of polite conversation.

Bear in mind that she was fresh from the sophistication of Indian society where people are still introduced to one another on social occasions and converse together with a show of good humour. Whereas in London behaviour is altogether more primitive and down to earth.

In the most perfect isolation she could not help saying to herself: 'He hasn't lost that look of his, which is so attractive—the look of a waster, tall and pale in the dingy softness of his clothes!'

To which the realist at once replied:

'What is that to you? Not only are you married, but you're a casualty from the world of pestilence and hot suns. Do you seriously imagine you can afford such feelings? You are an exhibit—do you hear?'

After thirty seconds, these forbidding lessons to her vanity began to have their effect. It was absolutely imperative to enter the little kitchenette.

There is no more amusing sight than a woman with a brain fertile in expedient grappling with morality.

'But this is not an invitation to slip back into our old relationship. Now that I am marked, he is curious to examine the remains.'

She recovered her spirits like lightning.

'My God, he's come to gloat,' took her safely across the room and through the enticing door. There is a brand of humility which goes far beyond pride . . . if only one can remember it at the right moment.

These two neurotics confronted one another.

Overcome with happiness, Gabriella had to give depth to her part or leave instantly.

She was cold, but made the fatal mistake of striking a personal note :

"What are you doing here?"

For answer he pulled out some letters disfigured by eighteen months in his pocket, and flung them on the table.

Such a wholesale borrowing from the past that she had to prevent herself crying out : "That's not fair !"

She met these efforts to break down her resistance with a further :

"How could you try to trap me like this !" Spoken in a whisper of growling softness; a woodpigeon is the only creature which both growls and coos in a similar fashion.

"Didn't it occur to you that I might have been worried about you !"

"I have been ill."

"People who scarcely know one another keep in touch. Idiots keep in touch with idiots. You would have sent a postcard to your char."

He was staring at her like a dipsomaniac whose spleen is full to bursting. "Turn tail and flee—if you dare !"

And unable to help himself :

"Of course you're no more important to me than my clothes, my shoes, my life-blood."

It was too late to recant, and start the conversation all over again: but she had already begun to back away from it mentally, just as a woman backs away from the date of her birthday. 'I must get away before I become used to him. Before our conversations begin to come round again . . . bred over and over again by the same city, the same cigarette smoke, idleness and youth.'

He was round her in a flash, fitted his arm across the open door and bolted the muscles together with a death-shot of rigor mortis.

Gabriella raised her eyes to the fanlight of dirty yellow glass in order to make a joke of the incident and put things on a lighter footing. 'I shall get out that way!'

But she had already caught the first tremors, the shiverings of the fever she inspired in him.

'He'd see me fall down at his feet, dead with exhaustion, rather than forgo a second of the time allotted to him. I feel like a Harley Street specialist eking out an expensive half hour with a hundred little tricks, in order to lead his patient to feel that he is getting value without actually having parted with anything.'

With her self-esteem restored, she was aware of her desire to attract . . . and instantly lost her moral passport, as it were, and with it all her composure. As though all her secrets had been dragged out into the light, she whispered, "I am to blame."

Gerard was transfixed. He suddenly realized that he had been hunting down quite dispassionately a nervous vulnerable creature, who was on the point of tears, and whom he *loved*!

He came up to her and they stood side by side gazing at plates of dusty sandwiches.

"I have been so terribly worried. This house is not the place for you. What sort of a room have you got?"

She found herself describing the large attic bedroom; he hung upon every word, questioned her fiercely about the quality of the linen, and when she came to the table with the red stone top covered with the initials of previous occupants, he burst out :

"That's how the swine makes his income!"

"You don't understand. This is exactly what I need. All these people clattering about reassure me. I must live on a superficial level. I need that table where other people have been lonely, written their letters, eaten luncheons of cold meat and bread, and added up their money."

A homely confession that touched his brain and his senses. . . .

"But you know you can't sleep in the dark on your own!"

He brought this out so naturally that she let it pass.

"What does that matter when I've got away by the skin of my teeth from the world's most terrible playground?"

"So you have been petted to death."

"Almost to death."

He felt as though he had dug inside her and his spade had rung true, like one hitting upon the foundations of an old civilization.

Never make the mistake of thinking there is time to stop and enjoy yourself when you are with someone you love. Like a suitor with bandaged hands, he returned to the attack verbally.

"You must leave this house. There's no question about

it. How can you get well here, where every room reminds one of the inside of a dirty suitcase. And the ogreish Doctor always lying back among heavily embroidered cushions which smell of hair pomade, yawning and clicking his jaws like an old dog. I can't bear to think of you under his roof."

The fact that he was asserting rights over her enabled her to answer like a nasty little girl :

"You're a prig, you know."

"But of course! I'm a prig; an outcast; a pariah. I make exorbitant demands on life. I do not intend to live in contact with plates and souls that are covered with gravy spots. How much less shall I allow it to happen to you!"

Her voice dropped: she tasted self-pity—a vile wet disease of the neck and mouth.

"How old-fashioned this sounds to me. I have long out-grown that stage. I dare not . . . so unsure is my hold on life . . . make the slightest plan for the future. All my energy now goes on remaining alive."

Words that brought him, metaphorically, to his knees. 'Any further along this vein of exalted sensibility and we shall no longer know what we feel about one another! Our relationship is vanishing while we examine it, just as a definition always leads you away from the true value of a word.

'You fool! As soon as you trim a life or a sentence to please someone else, you're lost. Self-indulgence is the key . . . you sign your death-warrant every time you're vanquished by this quivering invalid with her head of burnished wool, who's supporting herself at the table beside you on golden knuckles. Get in first with your

scale of values—she will be curious to know how she stands in relation to it, and be pleading for good conduct marks before she can set up her own terms of reference.

‘Stiffen up, for Heaven’s sake! Every day for the last eighteen months you have gone down to the post with your heart in your mouth—to look for a letter which she had not even conceived, which she had not the slightest intention of writing!

‘Unless of course an unsuccessful love-affair has an appeal for you: as the celibacy of a religious order is for the sybarite only another form of sexual enslavement.

‘My heart bled for you, you greedy polished little heiress! If only I have it in me to make you suffer for it, we are saved—from the profound joys of herd life, virtue, and mediocrity!’

So conscientiously did he work upon himself that in a few seconds he was swelling with outraged vanity. His glare had the depth of ink, and his ill-humour was full of marrow.

Without preamble he said:

“Very well, I shall have to plan for you. I’ll call for you tomorrow evening at half-past six.”

Gabriella started away from him, absolutely terrified: cooped up with this handsome white demon she felt that she was undergoing an ordeal by temptation.

He took it as a last ditch stand for convention, and added the sarcasm:

“If you’re thinking of your jailers, make it the coffee bar on the corner. I can be circumspect.”

She was on the point of justifying herself on that score, and had begun to say: “It’s not that at all...” when he grabbed up the letters and tore himself away.

He crossed the room and bent upon his hostess sardonic glances full of witchery.

Bebette congratulated herself on enlarging her circle with an absolute monster. 'No manners, no side to him, considers no one here worth talking to about his work—here's a first-class egomaniac!'

For ten minutes he was a born flatterer; he got away with the most outrageous compliments. Since everyone secretly believes they are unique, however much cartilage reason stretches across the ego, should someone murmur: "But then, there's no one quite like you is there?" the creature answers: "Hm, well . . . how right, how true! So you've noticed it?"

A cynic would have said of Gerard's behaviour: "He is merely providing himself with a backdoor key to the house."

Swingler went skipping into the little kitchenette all agog.

"What have you done to Bebette's protégé? He's gone off with a flea in his ear. That was very naughty of you."

He looked about him greedily, digesting the atmosphere as a tree digests earth.

The Doctor and his wife were consistently unfaithful to one another. For those with time on their hands, it is of course an art.

Like a thieves' code, or the subtle laws which obtain in *vers libre*, the immoral obey a stiff morality. You enjoy liberty only so long as your intellect and passion are equal to it. It need hardly be said they were snobs; everything had to be conducted perfectly.

"The conventional," said Swingler, petulant velvet

lips enjoying every syllable, "little know how fortunate they are to have something positive to bite on."

Gerard left after having his hand pressed to a jelly by one of Bebette's—an animal in its own right.

He made the interesting excuse that he had stomach cramp (everyone was drinking vodka and lying down carefully on the floor) and so strong is the habit of conforming to words that he actually walked up and down until he felt better—before he realized that he had invented it.

'What foulness. How low I have sunk.'

Down there, amid the bones and dirt of the city, his habitual melancholy began to assert itself.

He considered the agonizing battle with sleep that awaited him; the bedside litter of drugs, crumpled handkerchiefs, half-read books, half-drunk glasses of water. 'No! I want to begin life now. I can't wait. I'm in a hurry. If I put it off any longer, I shall die like a rat in a hole, with my heart broken and my life half-lived!'

It was only when dawn was imminent that he was able to turn his steps toward home: his soul must warm itself at the prospect of coming light and sound, like a merchant prince of Venice scouting for his navy which snores on the horizon in its cups, its frock of linen empty of music and sipping the waters.

Certainly not while tomorrow was over Japan with the dough and ink of its bread and newspapers still unwet.

'And the clothes I am wearing bringing up the rear, folded over a chair.

'Suppose I had gone to bed, I should only be woken up at two o'clock in the morning, in a fit, with my heart racing, and ask myself: "What is it?" Everything in position, even my disgust, well then? It's your life asking to be lived, you dolt!'

This makes for vagabondage . . . to the edge of nowhere.

By now he was going along sniffing at the gardens as he mounted the hill.

'What goes on up here? Boredom, bed-making, currant picking, and eternal ridiculous conversations in backrooms. She'll find out soon enough that she's among the greatest actors in the world.'

He passed between hedges uncut for centuries, and built up to the heavens in sopping layers of drops, insects, birds and clouds.

His heart rumbling and purring as though he had the head of a lioness just under his coat.

'How dare she leave me for a man who has made her suffer so horribly in a filthy country not fit for dogs? I, who can't live without her, and,' with a moment of blinding triumph, 'who don't intend to!'

A minute later:

'Does she really intend to settle down in this area, where everyone carries about a moth-eaten little book—one of those whose deep linen cracks smell of urine, and are filled with knots of waxed thread? The book that enables them to put life on one side, until they are ready to live it: that is, never.

'These people are able to lead lives of apparent order and decency since their desire for possession is concentrated upon houses, books, and other people's ideas.

'Whereas mine,' (bragging into the darkness), 'is concentrated solely upon people!'

'And it is this which leads you into the most extravagant follies,' his reason answered tartly.

Swingler and Bebette were having one of their quarrels. They went on boiling up coffee all the morning while the world came and knocked at their door and went away again.

Swingler suffered from high blood pressure and was a past master in the art of blackmail by innuendo and symptom.

When he was waiting his turn to speak he took up bottles of pills and measured out doses for himself.

While during his innings Bebette would ply a great fan, as dusty as an old hen's wing, so that he was compelled to hold down any loose papers in her orbit as he talked.

People who have been married for twenty years have grown so close, that they have lost the art of communicating with one another, even on the smallest matters.

Presently he thought of something even more damnable. And whenever she showed signs of being deeply moved he rushed forward with a little screwdriver and screwed up some fitment that was hanging loose.

The students tiptoed about in plimsolls; but continued inexorably to give themselves baths, to make *sotto* telephone calls, and to practise upon inexpensive musical instruments.

Bebette left her husband warming his shirt in front of the tin electric fire, and went up to speak to Gabriella.

Her brows covered with hot cake, frowned together in a trench at the top of her nose; when she was angry her features had the violent hue of cheap food, which is heavily dyed and peppered to attract coarse appetites.

She gave her the affair in detail, as though she was an old friend of the family. In fact she had known both Gabriella's parents before their deaths abroad.

"Sometimes I think he has a brain the size of a walnut. He plods about—it's enough to make you scream. And that head of his, I'd like to clock it with a little hammer!"

At this Gabriella had the hardest job in the world to keep a straight face. She was waiting for Bebette to let fall that irrelevance with which people round off a confidence, and which will tell you at last what it has all been about.

"Perhaps I was a little jealous of you, without knowing it," said Bebette, in the voice of a matron of arts for whom this is of course an amusing joke. "You made such an impression on my little librarian, who is so raw and so vulnerable that I'm sure if I were to stroke him I should draw blood!"

Now established as enemies, they smiled without restraint: their relationship eased considerably

"And you know 'Bodo' " (Gabriella was electrified at this exposure of the Doctor's privacy; wives are merciless in stripping their husband, their baby and animal, when they no longer want him) "is ready to jump into the fire for you. He has been a new man ever since you arrived. He used to let everything go—his car, his beard, his bills. I am very grateful to you."

'Does she realize, I wonder, that she is trying to strike

a bargain with me?' thought Gabriella, 'and one I don't care for at all. In two or three minutes she'll be reminding me that I am one of the sick and lame. In return I shall consider it my duty to limp every time we meet, which will cause her extreme annoyance since she will be expected to pity me.'

A piece of mental bravado. No woman is proof against the vulgar accuracy of a sexual estimate by one of her own sex.

Bebette said :

"He will drive you to hospital, you must consider him your devoted slave!"

('Perhaps I can hire some crutches. Or, better, have myself carried about in a litter.')

And catching sight of Gabriella's hair-brush laid across the window sill to dry :

"You seem such a modern young woman to all of us, that we tend to forget you're quite a baby still!"

Only those who know the misery of a physical disability can estimate the service Bebette had done her.

'What—am I considered fit for intrigue, lies, and touting for male favour all over again? Am I really to be allowed to take part in all that is normal among cultivated people!'

Chapter IV

‘SHE WILL keep me waiting for an hour. After which curiosity will lead her to test my fidelity. She will arrive panting, very tired, very late, and immediately begin to abuse me.

‘In this inflammable condition she must be fed at once; no compliments until the Neapolitan ices—or she will stop up her ears.

‘Conversation will be out of the question. In order that we shall not be sucked under by coteries at other tables roaring with laughter, I shall gossip steadily on the most frivolous topics, but without the slightest interest—so that I cannot be accused of enjoying the sound of my own voice. Directly she is well enough we shall discuss Swinger or Hankin as an alternative to discussing ourselves. After wine, we shall find them hilariously funny.’

London awaited him, superbly gloomy under her fresh crust of cold weather.

Every inch the beau tonight, Gerard had gone in to receive his due from his mother.

He strutted a bit; was reproved for it; and pushed off by her fingertips.

"Yes I can see you're oiled and tonsured like a professional philanderer and very pleased with yourself," said this pretty woman of sixty. "If I were thirty years younger I should consider you very dangerous indeed. Now do go off before I start enjoying your company."

'Still hinting at the role she would like me to play!' thought Gerard, walking fast. 'On the one hand I am faced by my life crying: "Don't make a mistake, it may cost you *all*," and on the other, sin, ironic, crying: "Courage!"'

An idle rabble was abroad: he imagined he recognized his own emotional countenance with its unhealthy white muscles on the faces of the young who squinted at one another as they passed.

You could smell the green vegetable fogs garrisoned over Bermondsey which at the moment were still under control but which, only a month or so later, were going to mutiny and break loose until they had the entire city bound and gagged with their verminous bandages.

He was astounded to see Gabriella enter the coffee bar at twenty minutes to seven. She was attired in a raw silk tunic of a greenish colour; her head shone, she wore rings and looked arrogant.

His heart sank like a stone.

'This is ominous. She is only ten minutes late, as fresh as paint, and dressed in the height of fashion. Obviously she is not in love with me.

'No doubt these preparations are intended to humble me. I am to bite the dust.'

Violently enraged, he found the greatest difficulty in getting to his feet.

He took her hand, kissed it very softly across the

knuckles, and returned it to her as you return to a shop assistant an article which no longer interests you, and which, since you are not going to buy it, you take particular care not to soil lest you should be asked to pay for it.

To add to his fury he saw that she was carrying an invitation card smothered with flags, mottoes, and gilded devices. 'How vulgar. That is a little too loud, even for an undergraduate's mantelpiece.'

As a final insult, she was in high spirits and extremely entertaining. She actually *chattered*.

Gerard folded his arms, smoked, and ground his cigarette holder. His chair struck him as being diabolically uncomfortable; he talked in a series of *non-sequiturs*. He even had time to feel hungry—something that had not happened for years!

She introduced the topic of Swinger and he was gracious, but when it came to Bebette who had done him nothing but kindness, and for whom he could not even isolate a positive feeling, he spoke like a beast aroused from its lair:

"The trouble with today's painters is that they are still thinking from a fashionable garret. And from someone else's garret at that. She expects me to disagree with her all the time, in order to prove that I've got an original mind: without realizing that one can be original in the manner of one's agreement. What's the use of offering ideas to a woman who wants to be flogged to her knees? It's like feeding *marrons glacés* to a gorilla. Of course there's still that odd notion going about that you can be too intelligent to paint. But I think we may safely say that it does not apply in this case."

The 'safely say' had the wasting brevity and hiss of the true pedagogue.

Gabriella froze. 'This is the man who last night could not think of anything but the degradation of a table with a red stone top.'

She had caught from him just sufficient malice to be able to reply.

"You must forgive me if I am not yet skilful enough to hold my own on the level of indiscriminate backbiting that goes on in London now."

"You mean she too has been running me down?"

"I mean that she has fallen for you."

"How funny."

"How bloody."

Fortunately there were just sufficient of the noises that pass for conversation in a coffee bar to allow them to sit this out in the most perfect ill-humour—in private it would have called for a decisive break.

Gerard, who passed through as many moods in a second as the average man can accommodate in an afternoon, was violently discouraged.

'How is it that I can endure rain and snow, every blow of an implacable fate and the company of mountebanks without turning a hair, but I cannot talk to her for two minutes and keep my temper?'

Immediately :

'So she has that damned reticence still, but it's increased to the point where it becomes disdain.' When Gabriella, to give them time to recover themselves, leaned upon the table and began to pull and 'drink' her cigarette.

This in turn gave him a pang.

'I know that mannish little gesture, with the hand knuckled over like a tired peasant's—caught from some docker's pub where I used to take her, when she was an infant with a brow of milk.'

Their relationship was so rich in layers of misery and happiness, that he had only to move a little to one side of his present mood, to fall like a lunatic into a profound ecstasy.

And as though it was the natural outcome of a long and gentle conversation, he turned upon her an adoring look.

In return Gabriella had formed such an extraordinary estimate of herself that she thought she had *mis-read* it. Remember: she related even courtesies done her to the fact that she could not walk properly.

One might say: 'She has a cast-iron excuse which allows her to meet him; whereas she would find the truth very much in the way.'

Gerard helped himself to the offensive card (cock-tails; yacht; Westminster pier).

"This is for tonight."

In an instant he had seized on the crux of the matter. 'It occurred to her that I might accompany her. But you do not ask a man who is in love with you to play escort among your husband's friends . . . unless you intend him to *squirm*. Let us put this to the test at once.'

He managed to frame his question in a perfectly calm voice. His hands turned to ice at the prospect of the wrong answer. 'I have manoeuvred her and put her integrity in doubt. Why in God's name must I set traps for her?'

What made it so grotesque was that Gerard was

prepared to run her through on a point of honour—while Gabriella's physical presence depended entirely on her ability to deceive herself on the highest level.

She made to speak, but he rose up in the most frightful agitation, summoned a waitress—one of those ultra-foreign girls so modern that they're sexless—and putting down uncounted coins, ushered them out of the place.

He kept his head averted, and just in case she should take it into her head to answer him, called out like a man shouting down the last trump :

“Never mind. I don't want to hear.”

They were exposed to lit and rumbling thoroughfares : winds were blowing, one at knee level and another high up tossing papers, electrically fit up there in the black heights of heaven.

Gerard immediately removed his coat, and turning on her in a rage, dressed her, kissing her head on one side and then on the other, as he put her into it.

“Fortunately I took the precaution of coming out without braces or waistcoat, so that I shall simply look like a bandleader. And not, as in the ignominious past, like a midland business man on a spree. I have come to the conclusion that this kind of thing amuses you. And now that I am aware of the hazard I can dress accordingly. Although I must admit that when I see a man walking along with a woman who is wearing a coat and one that is to all intents and purposes *her own*, I do occasionally feel a stab of envy.”

He got her into a taxi, and pulling down a seat, installed himself opposite. ‘I am neither an old roué, nor a greenhorn; that is to say I will not jog beside you like a confounded doll.’

Setting his haggard and charming face toward her, he invited her to compromise a second time with his eyes—which were perfectly clear, brilliant, and possessive. And besides wholly immoral and contemptuous. ‘How are you going to extricate yourself? You have accepted my coat and my kiss . . . and in this game, there are no extenuating circumstances. Which puts it on a par with war and finance; in that it calls forth emotion which is exact, ruthless, and therefore clean.’

Gabriella at once took refuge in extreme sophistication; she sulked :

‘If you are going to behave in an underhand way by indulging in a series of gestures from the past I shall merely respond like a dog going through a hoop.’ This would hardly do, and she knew it.

Since the truth is, she had abandoned herself to the warmth and odour of his coat as to a physical embrace, and it was necessary to pay for it. Watching her behaviour, an intelligent observer would have noted : ‘She raps herself over the knuckles every ten minutes—but after all it’s only to give herself time to re-adjust her moral frontier!’

She said, but to her credit, without conviction :

“This cannot go on, you know.”

“Ah ! So you actually admit something is going on ! I feel as though I’ve won a prize. Do you know, this evening you reminded me of an aunt I once had who cut me out of her will and to soften the blow, gave me a box of handkerchiefs.”

“I thought up to now, you were sorry for me. And that you took pleasure in my company.”

"Hardly. I get more companionship from a bus conductor."

"Does it occur to you that I'm so terribly afraid, I feel as though my heart will jump out of my chest—if I make a false move!"

Leaning forward with eroded brow, and black frost on his lips, he said :

"And what, in God's name, do you mean by 'a false move'?"

"Don't hound me until my back's against the wall and I have to reply with something smart!"

"Oh, this is absolutely piffling! Don't mince words with *me*. I feel as though crossing deserts and scrambling over mountain tops would be child's play compared with the powers of endurance and sly native cunning I need to get under your guard."

In the dark rattling cabin the desire for confession was too strong for her.

"Very well; at the risk of being torn to pieces. . . ."

Gerard, who foresaw another dangerous silence if she began to take herself too seriously, replied with the utmost gravity :

"Be illogical, and above all, long winded."

Not a flicker for this; instead, a piece of shyness that took his breath away :

"At one moment I think . . . you are taking too much for granted. And I feel desperate, as though I must pack my trunk again and fly across Europe. But at the next—you're so moody—I get my sense of proportion back, and realize I've got an inflated opinion of myself."

For a moment he was stunned; and then had to suppress a shout of laughter.

"Rot. Lies. Bilge. I'm in love with you, and *you* damn well know it," and turning round, hammered on the glass pane, and in the same breath called out: "Stop here."

He dismissed the cabby and escorted her along the embankment. Neither spoke. He appeared anxious to be rid of her.

The Thames, full to the brim, ran between blue mansionry. A bone idle rainstorm had been set in motion, and with its irons corroded, glided in silence overhead.

One detected from the sharp air that winter was flying high on ermine blades.

A number of boats were whining on their cords. An outsize motor launch raised upon agate wavelets and toying with her mooring, emitted light, together with little squeals and jabberings.

Gerard drew up sharply as though touched by a canker.

"That's far enough."

A major domo in a turban was holding down a toy gangway that fidgeted under his hand. On catching sight of them, he beckoned and exhorted them with all his might, while keeping one hand on his restive charge. Evidently guests had been showing fight at the last moment.

Gabriella, stupid with happiness, was waiting for the two words: "Don't go", which would compel her to hand over the coat, and make off *against her will*.

But he refused to put himself in the wrong. In return for the coat she received the humiliating imperative:

"Hurry."

The moment she was out of his grip—he had been

bearing her across the pavements without ceremony—he remembered her disability. And watched her over the footbridge in an agony; a thousand cautions dying on his lips.

Her disappearance coincided with a fresh outburst of screeching and handclapping. The boat then settled down to twitter like an aviary.

His subsequent departure caused great suffering to the major domo. Seeing his prey getting off scot free, he let out a howl, and launched into a panegyric of the fantastic pleasures to be had below decks.

‘Hold your fire, my poor fellow. I know you’ve my best interests at heart. But I flatter myself I already know the quickest routes to Hell.’

Two villainous city men flushed and corseted in double breasted suits passed him at a gallop, and hurried aboard, mad with glee.

Gerard took them as sample fare, and ground his teeth.

‘So these are the people she consorts with.’ (Hitherto somewhat dashed by the richness of the card, his spirits rose at once.)

‘What moves inside her? Am I going to find just another typist sitting about in a red coat, when the disguise wears off? Then I shall be saved! I can work and think again—smell trees, hear people talking—liberty!’

He found himself moving toward the bridge, where he would have the boat in full view from above. And what is worse, proceeding with loitering footsteps like a cur!

An ebony grit swirled round his feet. Water and darkness unlocked the destitute in him: his secrets bit their velvet gag.

‘No! No! No! Not another bloody silly woman who’s

lived a bloody silly life! The dog's messes all over the garden, the towels covered with lipstick, and a scented soap so virulent it makes your bowels squeamish when you walk along the corridor. As some poor fool said to me—and being English he naturally thought it was a joke:—"My wife sticks everything on that bill-spike of hers. When I used to write her a note telling her I loved her, why it went on the bill-spike with the rest!"

'On all sides, the vision of other people's lives being used up . . . going rotten with love and comfort . . . practically everyone loping about in carpet slippers, yawning and drinking soup and tea. Frightful!'

He shuddered, and pushed it to the back of his mind, and tried to rid himself of it with an accompanying gesture of his hand—as though he was actually wielding one of those great rods which bakers use to push loaves of uncooked bread to the back of a dark oven.

'If only one could shrug one's shoulders and say: "In this bourgeois society . . ." No such luck. I swim in cabbage soup, but it is a soup of *discriminating professionals*. The old enemies of art—irony, fashion, erudition, good-taste, and charm—would be winning hand over fist but for the fact that they are being fought with the newest weapons, namely: irony, fashion, erudition, good-taste, and charm.

'Children adore the idea of God—it's the terrifying materialism of religion that disgusts them. Thus the relationship between the artist and his art; all the rest is bogus . . . everything takes place in a gold-plated room where the compromise with life has been signed.

'Thank heavens for the lasting benefits of a mis-spent youth, which has unfitted me for a successful career. I

shall never find my way into the Englishman's heart with an essay on bus tickets.

'Those days given up to drinking, dreaming, and talking; days spent reading in cafés, and exploring idleness to the depths . . . and this delicious bitchery . . . they've wasted a third of my life, and if I can help it they will waste it completely!

'Above all, never let me learn my lessons—so that I can go on doing the only things that make life bearable! Spending, sinning, and coveting what is someone else's!'

Sneering arrogance is not only a perfectly reputable alternative to ambition; it is very slightly cleaner. A vocation is superior to a profession.

And hanging over the black wall, he laid his wager once and for all upon the tipsy boat below him.

Up to now, his blood thickened by ill-humour had kept him warm. A more philosophical frame of mind at once let in the wet breath of the river.

'Are you going to hang about here, goggling at nothing, until you've grown the double hump of a dowager?'

He stirred, and started off walking on grog-soaked joints—like a man rotten with malaria who has had the courage to dress and leave hospital. Which is to say, he plunged back into his life again: 'I am unhappy, absolutely desolate, because I have seen her, and because I am going to see her!'

When the pubs closed he pretended that he wished to give himself the pleasure of strolling past Swingler's house.

'She will be in bed by now, of course. What's the harm in passing once? Just to see the light coming from her room high up—like the mysterious glow you get from the red barrel of a cracker, when you look in through a loophole and fancy you can make out some light luggage on which the seals are still intact.'

And he immediately took up a position from which he would be able to hear the approach of her taxi and yet still remain hidden. It is true to say that once he had found a spot—between two walls thick with grime as kitchen stoves—he did look up for her light. And was not disappointed, since the windows were blank.

By midnight he was in a diabolical frame of mind.

The metropolis gave itself up to rust, frostbite and half a dozen exotic footsteps in the distance.

A croupier, accustomed to rough crackling banknotes, had been at the leaves. Those macerated heaps, like a brown frock coat thrown off a century ago, were as hot as pudding inside.

After this city which is so dirty, so impossibly difficult to live in, you could never bring yourself to respect another which made living easy!

He emerged and made sorties up and down the pavement on ringing feet. 'The hour for espionage and concealment has now passed. I am free to make a jealous ass of myself . . . after all I'm most suspicious of myself when I'm at my most disinterested. A lie brought me here, but she's given me too much time—that's as dangerous as leaving a madman alone with his thoughts—and I've recovered my self-respect.'

He brushed the dirt from his shoulders.

He discovered that for an hour he had been staring

at Swinger's car; spying gives one the mentality of the linen cupboard or the confessional box—the obvious is beneath notice.

Parked under the lamp it was covered with the heavy tiger dusts of autumn. In the cockpit were a pair of hogskin gauntlets, yellow as mustard.

'So the ninny drives in highfalutin gloves!'

This gave him as much satisfaction as if he had emasculated Swinger. 'Not content with playing landlady!'

Bent over, grinning (with all the latent schoolboy in him), and nose pressed to the glass, he took it into his head that there was a piece of greenish silk lying under the gloves. '*Her scarf!*' shouted the lover.

He flew into a rage; and circled the car glaring through every window like a fanatical surgeon looking for traces of arsenic in a body.

'She lets that oversexed goat, that hairless old bull take her about—and ogle her from between the fleshy little lids of his eyes. My God, it's enough to make you sick. And then she has the nerve to talk to me as though butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. She's a prude, and like all prudes *inside* she's totally immoral. Thank you, I prefer the whore.'

Lightning strokes that burnt up the northern clay and left him jaundiced and leering with blistered lips like a coolie.

A taxi approached, hesitated, and drew up beside him.

His eyes flamed. He wrenched open the door, and invited her in a voice at white heat, to tell him whether or not she had had 'a good time'.

Chapter V

IMAGINE TWO bankers transacting money at the counter five minutes before the financial day closes at three on a London afternoon.

These snatches had the same rapidity, bite, and assurance of two such people meeting a deadline . . . but you know that after a certain moment they will no longer be in control of the affair.

Gerard said :

"You've been out for five hours. Tell me, was it as amusing as the short period between the wars—when there was only just time for vice and strongly held opinions?"

A devilish opening. And like a match to a bonfire it was the old Gabriella who answered.

"Oh yes. It was like being in a house with a ninety-nine year lease. There was just long enough to sit down and smoke a cigarette."

Well done, sneered the opposition, now try this!

"I'm not in the least bit curious about what has actually been *going on*," in a tone as hard as iron, "I know how you underestimate yourself."

"That is such a compliment that I'm going to lose my temper."

"Oh come now, don't pretend you ever get sick of these eternal preliminaries!"

"Of course not. You must let me give you the evening in detail."

The silence was so profound that you could hear these two human voices snarling together for a hundred yards.

Gerard went right up to her in order to say :

"I intend to hear. I have an imagination like a piece of dirty paper."

He continued walking round her, and began to shout :

"For God Almighty's sake let's make this very very trite. It's our only hope."

Gabriella thought : 'He has the effect on me of bad champagne and bad plays. I have a reckless desire to throw things; boo and hiss. In the old days I would have added : "and travel east". Of course he is waiting for me to torment him . . . but if he thinks he can get me to admit anything that way, he's making a mistake.'

He stopped dead in his tracks, as though she had spoken.

This time he addressed her in a succession of low molten notes.

"Don't worry, you've given nothing away—in words. I doubt whether you've even had the courage to chalk up a score inside your head. You've resisted the temptation; or if you've given in to it—you've gone about it like a mathematician without writing materials who draws the answer to an equation in the dust on his table top. Rub it out : quickly ! And go on creeping past the furniture."

Make a bad guess at a woman's thoughts and she will be agreeably moved; bring off the hat trick, and you have her in the palm of her hand.

Gabriella flew at him :

"Oh I must be a great disappointment to you, now that I have almost forgotten how to talk so as to give pain!"

He was obliged to take a step backward. And with one foot in the drooling gutter, collected his winnings :

"On the contrary. Believe me, you know very well how to give pain. It's simply that it's part of your code nowadays to look the other way when you throw your knives."

'How true!' thought Gabriella. 'But he's asking too much at the moment. I haven't the physical strength to find out what I feel—let alone cope with the afterwards.'

A clock struck. And simultaneously a light went up on the floor above them.

In two seconds the whole house came alive and opened up. Voices gabbled furiously. The front door which must have been locked, bolted and barred, was set upon from within. Intricate preliminaries with chains were gone through.

"The basement area," said Gerard.

"I shall stand my ground."

"Never indulge in empty gestures for the sake of the vulgar mob."

They descended the steps and hid ignominiously.

Gerard, who never let an opportunity slip, had her under his coat in a trice.

The wretched Swinger, clad in an overcoat and silk dressing-gown, emerged in a blaze of light and came and

stood by the railings above their heads. They could see the knob of his ankle bone sticking out under his skimpy pyjamas. He kept striking matches and putting them to a venomous cigar.

Now there is something hideously comical about a man with naked ankles trying to smoke a cigar in the street at one o'clock in the morning. Swinger, a natural comedian, heightened the effect by leaning against the railings and promptly crossing his legs.

This dandified attitude may seem perfectly fit and proper when you sample it from a position of equality, but seen from below when you are wound up and seething with impatience, it's wholly unjustified—utterly grotesque and nerve-racking.

'What I find so especially amusing,' thought Gerard, 'I mean apart from the more obvious virtues of the situation, is that snuffling noise he makes when he misfires and showers us with matches.

'If you're lying in wait for her, my friend,' he went on, addressing the nearside ankle, 'and fancy you cut something of a dash as a masterful rogue, let me assure you that down here we're at grips with sober reality. And if this whim of yours—which entails getting out of a warm bed in the middle of the night—is an attempt to give depth to a shallow bohemianism, I must tell you that you have never appeared quite so middle-brow, so incomparably low, ordinary, and lacking in imagination as you do to me at this moment!'

"Bodo!" cried a terrible voice.

The Doctor came to with a shudder; uttered some wicked and outlandish syllables, and took himself off.

Presently they heard him get into the car and slam

the door. The wheels scrunched upon some crystallizations as he drove away. At twenty yards the machine lost speed and began to purr and ease itself along the gutters.

The Doctor, seated bolt upright at the controls in his yellow gloves, advanced into the night with all lights blazing to milk the thoroughfares.

"He is searching for you," said Gerard.

They exchanged gleaming looks.

Gabriella at once turned her head, rather as a well-mannered waitress looks away when she thinks you are going to tip her.

'She is re-establishing her innocence, but too late!'

And Gerard who felt as weak as though he had fallen down the basement steps and covered himself with bruises, laid his head, dead drunk and heavy with plotting, on her neck.

He gave her time, like a big game hunter reassuring a nervous animal by drawing deep breaths to show it the resemblances between them . . . while he tastes with his cheek the boiling sobs that rise up in its throat.

But not too long. He imagined he could already detect the little growl, the little shrug with which she was going to throw him off.

He felt himself go crimson with rage and desire in the darkness. If he could have got out a word, he would have shouted: "Hypocrite!"

He at once gathered her up like a hothead.

Terrified of the world, and of herself, Gabriella kissed him like someone saying goodbye, in great pain and in a hurry: that is, with complete abandonment.

Gerard who had made up his mind to cope with any

rebuff with the unscrupulous brutality of an artisan, and who had locked up in his coat a fretful, icy socialite, found himself in possession of a creature—brilliant, soft and troubled—whose impatience matched his own.

They hung upon one another, absolutely delirious.

‘But I *adore* her!’

He kept just sufficient wit about him to shut her mouth every time she tried to speak. Apart from hearing the night wind stirring pieces of litter as it passed over their heads, he allowed himself the luxury of being made senseless by another human being.

Their seclusion—they might have been standing at the bottom of a deep earthenware jar—had given them a false sense of security.

If they thought themselves able to drown down there in the blue-black darkness at the bottom of the world, they were mistaken.

Roused by blinding electricity, which brought up every nail and callous on the upper part of the wall behind them, they were driven into the remaining shade by the ever vigilant Swinger returning from another direction without warning.

Gerard exploded.

“This is really burning the candle at both ends!”

He was clumsy enough to ring one of the dustbins with his shoe . . . and with the sort of dedicated ferocity of a man accustomed to tuning a seventeen hundred-weight bell.

Fortunately Gabriella’s desire to laugh overcame her sense of the squalid and ignoble in this dodging about among dustbins.

And while the love-sick Doctor was passing overhead

—a marvel of craft and sloth in his illuminated vehicle—she remained doubled up, and couldn't be spoken to without choking.

Directly he was gone, with his large white continental face broody at the wheel upon his fruitless errand, she became calm and thoughtful.

Gerard was watching her closely: 'What now? At least she is behaving with naturalness—she is not going to give me one of those excruciating looks as if I were nailing her up alive in a coffin. This means: she accepts responsibility for her actions. And high time.'

In spite of the dangers of their situation, the magic of their old relationship had so strongly asserted itself, that neither could make a move.

Rather than mount the steps, Gabriella seated herself on the bottom one in the dirt like an angelic scavenger. Here, wildly exhilarated by one another, they talked. One could not lower an eyelid without interesting the other.

Dangerous moment—when the sexes are on the verge of trusting each other, and no longer speak with the cruel slipshod mouths of charming friends.

Gerard said:

"You must have known I'd be waiting for you the moment you set foot in England."

"Oh, so you're out for wholesale admissions. I would be a fathead to say 'yes'. You'd be on your dignity in an instant."

"Admit that you looked out for me."

"That's the fault of association."

"How you hedge! What must I do? Grovel on my stomach for a few more half-hearted 'yesses'?"

This with head well up of course, and plenty of white to the eye and blue bone in the bone; the very image of a capable boot-licker.

Gabriella, completely herself, couldn't resist such prey. And struck out without pity in an amorous voice full of laughter, not usually heard north of Florence.

"Thank you. That's perfect! I can see now that there's no one happier than a man whose love you don't take seriously. He can groan and throw himself about in a paroxysm. But say: 'I believe you' and he leaves the room puzzled and uneasy."

"You're saying: a relationship is ideal only when it's precarious!"

"Well: isn't that what you want to hear?"

A blackish knot of hot flesh appeared over the bridge of his nose. It is by dint of such remarks that a cocotte puts into your mouth the furious denials which will chain you to her for life. The thought flashed through his head: 'She is too subtle.' And immediately: 'How like my mother, who makes sure of me by asking nothing at all of me. Not even a conscience. Are these two women in league to tie me to their apron strings forever by appearing to protect me, at all costs, from living my life?'

He said:

"Don't argue my case for me with deliberate inaccuracies. It touches my heart, don't you see, and makes me feel you love me. And I have come to your protection."

She was going to pass over this deceptive murmur, which appeared all of a piece with his past behaviour, when she found to her amazement that it left a bad

taste. On examination, the conceit appeared in glaring colours. Thoroughly aroused, she said to herself: 'You Monster! Bebette was right; you require stroking until you bleed!'

And she worked herself out of his arms with these words:

"I remember you used to do this before . . . when I began to trust you."

Gerard was taken completely by surprise. His face resembled that of a man who has been dining tête-à-tête in an exclusive little restaurant when quite suddenly the doors open to admit reality in the shape of a porter in a sackcloth apron carrying between a pair of gigantic fire-tongs a two-gallon lump of ice for the kitchens.

He lost his head:

"What is it? What have I done? Is it because you've shown emotion and now you're trying to go back on it? Do you think you can turn me off with a few cold words."

And added—it was the voice of a lonely man who has been drinking heavily:

"Why in God's name must there always be the tang of the railway station and the dockside about all our meetings?"

Gabriella fell upon it.

"Exactly. They are *unreal*: food and sleep go by the board. Whole days are lost; swallowed up! We're at two or three removes from life."

He made an effort to conceal his pleasure at this accident of speech which raised him to the seventh heaven. Fatal words jumped out of his mouth.

"How heavenly . . . so you admit it. At last!"

Ambushed, and dropping with exhaustion, she dragged herself up the steps :

"I want to live with the minimum of difficulty. Don't you understand? I need a roof overhead, three meals a day, the company of people who mean nothing to me, and permission to be tired and ugly for days on end."

He followed hectoring her on every step like some barker from the underworld expounding a doctrine of moral licence.

"You know what you are choosing?" flinging an arm up the flour and water stucco. "Being put to bed in racks—like shoes. You're climbing on to the wastepile of human beings, who pit 'being *nice*' against the relentless excitement of *living*—ideas, dawns, midnights, cities, to be played with for the asking! Until they're old men and old women with hair as yellow as an old blanket. Shall I tell you what London consists of? Women stabbing each other with hat pins: intellectuals wildly counting up one another's ages in backrooms: and flat-footed bestialities scrambling into bed with one another.

"Don't you ever say to yourself: 'I shall be eaten up, contaminated—I shall lose my integrity forever, if I have to be *nice* to one more person'? With that brow and those hands! You're not worthy of them."

He groaned out loud:

"Haven't you found out yet that the only thing that matters is the recognition of one unique kind of human being by another?"

When a man has lost caste with a woman he has serious doubts as to whether she is capable of giving herself. He philosophizes: that is, he casts a slur on her person and way of life. (The Greek theory of a half-

soul seeking to be made whole is a hot favourite in the philosophy of seduction; since it proceeds—like the creation of an elaborate ball dress—by trial and error, and innumerable ‘fittings’.)

Gabriella kept walking on and shaking her head.

“I have long ago passed the level on which you are conducting this. You tear and worry at your life like a dog at a slipper.”

They had completely exchanged roles; this was no longer a woman who refused to be a party to her actions.

She uttered a mysterious little moan which sent his soul sweating into his boots.

At the front door he seized her hand, and looked at her in agony.

“I can’t bear to part from you.” He put down his head with a sob. “Go on then—up to your cheap room!”

She left him standing there in a melancholic frenzy, and closing the door collapsed against it, blazing and quivering. This is how an actress reaches the dark wings of the stage after running through the emotions of a lifetime in a hundred and twenty minutes.

Chapter VI

AFTER THE tantrums and embraces on those ill-fitting steps to the bottom of the world they saw one another intermittently. And had days to dig over their thoughts.

Gerard went about his work with a face of clay, heavy with barbiturates; he was by no means unhappy. Rather, paralysed by fierce hopes.

'If only she would do something for which I could despise her—I could then cold-shoulder her for as long as a week, which would lend an appearance of stability to my emotions!

'I should dearly like to know what constitutes permanence in her judgment. Am I to be classed as provisional—because I'm infatuated?

'An infatuation which it will take days and days of lovemaking (a lifetime in fact), to cure.'

By the evenings he achieved a citrus pallor.

Actors and lovers are living works of art, who bring eternal forces up to date, and the strain is intolerable.

But what he had overlooked was this: although he might have just sufficient time to win her over, there

was not a moment to be lost if he intended to change his whole way of life.

By contrast Gabriella spent her time like one of the damned, trying to read a sky covered with ill-humoured writing.

Swingler snored behind the wainscot. Or released floods of evil into her ear.

“At the very sight of her a sort of overpowering rage takes hold of me” (he was speaking of Bebette). “It’s as though a cell in my brain had broken down and black mud was pouring out all over the good healthy parts which were still trying to think clearly . . . and then hey presto! I have all the symptoms of acute hysteria. That terrible pain in my head which ends up at the back of my tongue! A continuous buzzing and ringing in my ears, and flickering lights before my eyes, even when I close them . . . due to the optic nerve being starved of blood, of course. Not to mention the fact that I’m full up to the neck with air and can’t breathe!”

“Ah, when she sees what she’s done, she’s sorry. She comes and claws at me, and there’s a weak, quavering voice she puts on which is a thousand times worse. And something cringing about her shoulders.

“To have to spend my life with a woman who can ruin my liver for the day . . . simply by the way she crosses a room!”

Note, it is a continental speaking, who takes a pride in finding the English husband “a gross and obscene animal, quite outside my experience.”

There was considerable danger in passing his room on the ground floor: it was wise to go by at the double.

Seated in the midst of his lumber, he appeared to be communing with himself. In fact he was every bit as alert and suspicious as a park-keeper in a hut full of truncheons and tree-ends, who knows that unless he is on his toes every second of the time there are sure to be some undesirable members of the public who will consistently importune one another, or try to dispose of an iron bedstead, or have an epileptic fit, or any one of the little things that come up in the course of an afternoon's walk.

Gabriella was fair game. Occasionally he called her in to listen to the appalling noise to which he was subjected. In an instant the deepest silence reigned. You had to sit there, hardly daring to breathe, for up to fifteen minutes while he hushed you furiously and strained his ears.

There was the question of getting something to eat. Gabriella had the honour of feeding with the Swingers: the repertory was vegetable soup, boiled eggs and garlic sausage.

On the fourth day of her visit she was challenged by Swinger while in the act of conveying to her room a whole roast chicken wrapped in polythene.

There was a scene; in order to put her in the wrong, he immediately forgave her.

And to show that he bore no ill will, he carried the bird up to her room and devoured some of it with her. Casting humorous glances at her as he bit and tore down to the bone.

"My poor child, what sort of life have you been leading? Bringing in your chicken to eat like a peasant! I will take you under my wing. I will give you some lessons

about life. You know nothing : you are a primitive; an egg."

Without the slightest warning he threw himself on the floor and embraced her round the knees :

"You frighten me. What am I to you? Are you going to use me like a towel on which you wipe your hands? How cruel you are!"

Gabriella looked at him in dismay.

'How am I to get him back on his feet again with his dignity intact—and without cracking his knee joints again like a pair of pistols? How horribly he rolls his eyeballs; is he ill or mad?'

To make it harder for her, he immediately closed his eyes and waited. When the eye is large and the white lid covers it snugly, the ball looks huge, dead, utterly repellent, especially in a face which continues to express lively and passionate feelings.

'This is frightful!' thought Gabriella, 'if I move, he's quite capable of crawling after me on his knees.'

After a whole minute in this acutely uncomfortable embrace, curiosity got the better of him and he opened his eye a fraction to see how she was getting on.

Gabriella caught him at it. And he was forced to get up deeply offended.

"Very well, madam," he said spitefully. "I thought you had suffered and become a proper human being. But I was wrong. You are nothing : you are just a silly little child."

Bebette was exhibiting some of her recent work in a

gallery with an entrance as discreet as a house of ill-fame or an old-fashioned opticians.

Directly you left the sparkling fog, entered the phosphorescent little passage, and smelled under the skins of gold leaf, the very sweet smell dirt has, you were aware that something dangerous and corrupt was afoot, that your principles were at stake, and that you were at last walking down the hot stem of a pipe of narcotics.

The Doctor ruined this absolutely new sensation with his bellowing whisper. He wore an amazing coat with skirts, and astrakhan lapels; and proceeded to lay bare the society which awaited them at the bottom of the passage while stripping off his gloves :

"If you want to know which are the most successful painters that is easy. Pick the men who look as if they blow on their soup and shovel up peas on a fork. Avoid anyone with that finely drawn, in-bred look, and high arches to their feet. What a pity you don't know anything about money; it is the only acceptable topic among fashionable people. It is the only subject which has integrity. . . ." Two or three indubitably fashionable people passed them, poker-faced.

Since the Doctor made no attempt to lower his voice, Gabriella was highly amused : 'He is either too important in this milieu to care how many enemies he makes, or else he's too well-bred to lower his voice and force them to strain their ears. And a third possibility is : he's telling the truth. In any case, I have grossly underestimated him. Such is the disability of an impulsive nature of his sort, one sees nothing but a sensuous clown.'

With mounting respect she told herself : 'I am with

the most devastating of all commentators: one who combines naïveté and insolence.' And looking at him with new eyes, she was able to forget Gerard for the length of the passage.

The Doctor continued delectably.

"I will introduce you to one of the wittiest men in London; he is a great artist who has the misfortune to be able to draw and paint. Everyone is afraid of him, you will see he looks good tempered and has no particular desire to be rude to them. Whatever happens don't let him catch you looking at the paintings. He only comes out to see his friends; and you will begin by annoying him and end by embarrassing him—he will keep turning round to find out what you are looking at, and trying very courteously to pick up the threads of the conversation. Or he will look coy as though you have asked him his age, or are trying to discuss his underwear. No one has thought of a better way of making a buyer ill at ease."

"But I haven't fourpence ha'penny."

He was shocked.

"That's beside the point. It is absolutely fatal to pretend to be poor: they will think you are pretending. Please don't embarrass me in this way. Try to be a little uncouth—as if you had money."

Gabriella halted in panic.

"I'd better go home. I'm bound to break one of these rules."

He seized her and dragged her into the room with his lips burning her ear.

"Nonsense. You will be a success. You will be as cold as a little jug of blue champagne; and I shall tell them

you are a gypsy who is always eating pieces of chicken with her bare hands."

He succeeded in making her furious; he failed to understand that he was dealing with a woman whose humility was new to her, and was the result of illness.

They were in an octagonal room crammed with people who left off gossiping only to glance rapidly at newcomers.

The scene resembled a court full of intriguers who were awaiting an audience in the antechamber of some female tyrant. One would guess they had been summoned at a moment's notice, since they were all at different stages of their toilet.

Those who were alone kept themselves in countenance by angrily blowing out clouds of smoke and drawing crosses in their catalogues: you understood that they had chosen solitude and were hard put to maintain it against the importunate.

Of the remainder, the very dregs of society, without intellectual resources of any kind, they could think of absolutely nothing to justify their existence--and past contempt, utterly worn out and disgraced, they surrendered themselves to the paintings.

There was a table covered with pamphlets which contained a list of titles as provocative as those of race-horses or of bottles of scent.

Now just across the room, a resplendent Hankin, his throat boiling with malice above a shirt with the cold silk flesh of an artichoke, was deep in conversation with Bebette... seen to advantage for the first time in the full regalia of an old trot!

Like all elderly connoisseurs who have few ideas of their own, when it came to the arts he was so strong minded he was practically mentally deficient. Combine this with a high, beautifully packed stomach, and the words: "I'm a debunker" (i.e. the soul of convention) and superficially you have your social man.

For another side of the picture take this reflection of Gerard's: 'Hankin appropriates my ideas so fast that his skill impresses me more than my originality.' No booby then.

Bebette had spotted her husband with his mouth pressed against Gabriella's ear. And calumnies burst out of her like wind escaping from a pie in the oven.

"Nobody minds him making a fool of himself over the girl. I congratulate him on being entertained so easily! But I know that if he goes on this way he's going to be ill—and I shall have to nurse him. So that my interest is entirely selfish, you understand." She performed a heartless little shrug.

"In what way, exactly, is he 'going on'?" asked Hankin, wildly excited at the prospect of getting on to something really interesting after five minutes of crushing boredom on some contemporary issue of burning interest to all 'thinking people'.

"Oh, you know the sort of thing . . . dressing himself up and hanging about the house, glaring at himself in all the mirrors. When I send him upstairs to get something, he's away for half an hour, and I go up and find him smiling into the cupboards!"

"Good heavens . . . and that's bad for his health of course?"

"It's his general condition. He walks about the house

powerfully, hewing off and eating great chunks of bread, flexing his muscles on the landing, and asking me to test him. And when we go out," said Bebette, her voice heavy with foreboding, "he immediately starts running and jumping!"

Hankin let out a sharp cackle.

When he was coherent :

"In fact generally overtaxing his strength?"

"He's impossible to live with. In the morning he lies in bed and says he feels capable of lifting great weights, enduring fire, or a den of lions. And not an hour later he comes to me and asks me to listen in to his heart, because he's noticed the beat is irregular."

"But it's chiefly the running and jumping that distresses you?"

"Oh he gets on my nerves with his horrible smile!" said Bebette with fierce joy.

Gerard had entered the room and with his nostrils pinched together fastidiously was looking about for Gabriella. His policy on these occasions was: "One or two essential affectations: all the rest in the bin."

His form of snobbishness required that he devote himself to the ugliest and stupidest person in the room. Which drew from his ambitious mother: "I would not yet call it martyrdom—but you very nearly make a vice of being polite to people who don't matter!"

Hankin had seen Gerard.

"Here's a dangerous young man," he said, preparing to move in.

But he was no match for Bebette. And found himself high and dry with her excuses, while she was already foraging deep among the bodies.

Impressed by her despatch and elbow-work, he said drily: "So that's how it is!"

There were drowsy muscles round his eyes; a first-class intriguer always slumbers on the job.

Two minutes later he happened to find himself hurrying past Swingler and Gabriella and stopped with an exclamation.

They were with a snuffling rather stuck-up old man who was saying:

"When I see the sort of snuffling stuck-up little beast I used to be. . . ."

He was evidently a man of character and distinction for he gave them quite ruthlessly and in the most pettifogging detail a recipe for home-made putty—and left abruptly before they could bore him.

"A great painter," said Swingler with admiration.

Hankin greeted Gabriella paternally.

But for the Doctor—a great deal too bright and alert with his hands moving to and fro, and a juicy little smile coming and going under his moustache—he put on a serious tone.

"My poor old friend," said the wretch, "how are you *managing*?"

At this the Doctor's eyes nearly bolted out of his head.

Hankin went on; he spoke very slowly, enunciated clearly, and kept saying: "Do you understand?"

Had it been anyone else speaking one would have said that, due to the fact that Swingler was a foreigner who spoke almost perfect English, Hankin naturally enough felt called upon to raise his voice and address him in broken phrases—never using quite the right tense so as to throw him off the scent, and changing the natural

order of the words lest he get an inkling of the sense.

But not in this case.

So that it must have been solely out of concern for the Doctor's health . . . who, with his face thrust forward, keen as mustard, was listening to him with extreme care and even going so far as to prompt him when he stumbled. But gradually becoming more and more bewildered; since in helping a stupid man to think, you yourself become equally stupid.

Gabriella watched them with amazement :

'So this is the sum total of London life—two old cronies egging one another on and scoring points with frenzied joy.

'And I assumed that illness and travel had increased my knowledge of life to the point where I was *too coarse* for aesthetic discussion.

'Whereas I find the current form is to discuss the arts only by ignoring them !

'How discouraging to find that after all, I am, if anything, slightly better fitted for such a conversation than anyone else in the room.'

Two young men nearby were trying to convey to her that she filled them with boredom and irritation, that they had no time for dressed-up young women, and that she was totally unacceptable to them.

'You are half an hour too late,' said her mouth, half smiling, 'even with a compliment. As for the matter of dress, I have the advantage of you : I am a slave of fashion, not of uniformity.'

For the first time since her return to England, she threw off her passive role. She felt a return of her old gaiety, and with a sudden lightness of spirit she was able

to look for Gerard not because she was in love with him, but because it was necessary to refresh her eyes with a set of uncompromising features, capable of crying: "Bogus!"

She saw him, went white to the lips, and was instantly furious. At the back of her mind had been the thought: 'If I'm quick, I can indulge in a casual glance, and get away with it—without the knowledge of my emotions.'

Hankin was now scolding on top doh.

"And I hear you've been running about like a two year old!"

The Doctor gave him a boyish look which, correctly interpreted, meant: 'I would like to tear you limb from limb.'

"My health is in Bebette's hands," he said. "What can one do with such a woman? She is going through this phase with these boys, and one must be patient with her. But it is very trying."

"She's not herself these days?"

"Who does she deceive with those fishnet stockings!" asked the Doctor dramatically.

"I see . . . it's that sort of thing that gets your goat?"

"And the fox fur," said the Doctor sharply, "every time she goes out I have to go with her because the dog down the road jumps at it. And she still tries to pretend that the only thing that interests her about this boy is the shape of his head."

The Doctor stopped and felt his skull.

"Then there's all this humming and singing."

"Ah! That goes on all day . . . or just comes in bursts?"

"It doesn't matter whether she's actually doing it,"

said the Doctor, with voluptuous pleasure. "I know that it's bound to come on sooner or later. And I'm keyed up all the time waiting for it. Sometimes I can't bear the strain and just to turn the screw, I start her off myself by humming a few bars under my breath."

"And that relieves the tension?"

"It does not!" shouted the Doctor in ecstasies, "it makes it a hundred times worse!"

And taking an even firmer grip on Gabriella so that she should hear every word, he bent down and from the black beef of his great chops began to revile Gerard.

"She calls him her penniless wolf. She says she wants to lick his wounds and curl up and make her home at his feet. It is sô...camp-follower! I said to her: 'Listen, I know this sort of young man. He is the new *matinée* idol, the gangster intellectual who comes alive only at night and talks about art for society's sake like a marxist. And if he had a little more money it would be art for art's sake. He is very old fashioned. And completely selfish.'"

"Aha. It's your policy to rub her up the wrong way?"

"Certainly not. She *agrees* with me. 'He is a beast, a brute!' she says. (It would make you ashamed to hear her.) 'He is incapable of love. There is some terrible flaw in his character. He is looking for someone who will force him to surrender to himself.' (It would make your flesh creep to hear her!) Believe me, she will do things for him she would not do for a human being!"

At this extremely subtle point, the two men exploded. The Doctor threw himself into strange attitudes, and

held them with considerable difficulty; he also exposed his teeth often and disagreeably.

Gabriella had been treating the whole affair as a cabaret; a form of entertainment so low that one has absolutely no protection against enjoying it! That is until he added quite without thinking:

"I am afraid he is only using her."

When she was seized with a fit of shuddering that made her teeth chatter. The unspoken question was: 'And suppose he is only using me? Why practice this foul deception on Bebette until he has her eating out of his hand?'

This had the effect of bringing her to her senses; but only in that she stopped short and surveyed her chances—in cold blood.

There is no slander invented which can restore a sense of balance to a woman in love. She simply uses it that she may fall more deeply, and plot ten times more fiercely.

By now Hankin was dying to get rid of the Doctor in order to have some private conversation with Gabriella.

He observed his man, who was positively frisky and all set for a further twenty minutes of witty sallies and intimate disclosures. 'Sticks like a limpet and laughs like a hyena—it won't do at all.'

And he began as methodically as a housewife removing the buttons from an old jacket, to strip the Doctor of his conceits.

Which he did quite simply by explaining one or two of the pictures to him rather well.

At first the Doctor listened, drinking it all in with his

ear thrust forward—imagine a really luxuriant ear, waxed and mottled like an orchid—and anticipating some outrageously funny joke.

But gradually he began to edge away, cringing. And finally broke out into a sweat.

To give him his due he hung on until the very last minute, ready to surface instantly should Hankin relent. The most hackneyed of jests, one upon, say, the excellence of the frames by comparison with the pictures, would have been perfectly acceptable. And would instantly have put the whole thing on a decent footing.

Finally he collapsed and went down under it, taking with him an everlasting impression of the picture which was being forcibly fed to him: just as a doomed ship takes the horizon down with it.

Unable to dislodge Gabriella, he relinquished her and fled—as thunderstruck, as vulnerable as if a lion had walked through the room!

Hankin immediately came to himself. He had the ability to ‘slip his clutch’ socially, so to speak; moving in a matter of seconds from the highest to the lowest levels of human behaviour.

“My dear girl, I couldn’t help noticing from your expression that you didn’t much care for the tone of the conversation. And to be honest with you,” said the old hypocrite, pasty with secrets as a chambermaid, “neither did I!”

He was in a mood when he felt inclined to acknowledge all sorts of things about himself, he realized that to gain information you must put yourself out a good deal . . . to the extent of talking about yourself, and even

coming out by accident with one or two things you're not particularly proud of! in order to make your victim thoroughly at ease.

"I'm afraid he is very hard on our mutual friend. Now I used to be exactly like Gerard; he's impulsive, he's out of the ordinary. He has time for a vision of society when most of us have only just time to say 'good-morning'! And like him, when I had once made an ass of myself with someone whose opinion I respected, I was all at sixes and sevens until I had an opportunity to rush up their stairs and—repeat the performance all over again!"

'He is trying to think my thoughts for me,' thought Gabriella. Moved by old ties, she added: 'But I am with a friend.'

She said without caution:

"He doesn't seem to have changed at all. That is: he's dominated by the same ideas."

He looked at her calculatingly.

"Oh, he is? But it seems to me he has difficulty in clarifying them. He needs a young woman who is very taken with him . . . to question him, and to let him use her brain as a sugar refinery . . . so that he can find out what he's *really* thinking."

Clumsy enough, one would have said, to put a girl of seventeen on guard.

One of the dangers of sophistication is that it overtakes convention and leaves it far behind; the result is, in the company of a scandalmonger you have the privilege of being the idiot you were, all over again.

Gabriella leapt into the trap. She said:

"He is a foreigner in his own life."

"You think so?" A masterpiece of oil and linen rustling beside her.

"Well, I remember he always was the sort of person who sat down and replanned his life once a week."

"Ah, you remembered that!" as if it was common knowledge.

Gabriella proceeded with her suicide. As for Hankin, it filled his soul to the zenith to find this gentle young woman falling over herself to adopt a role he had no more than *sketched in* a few seconds ago.

She said with strong feeling :

"There's a favourite remark of his: 'The people among whom we spend our time are not those with whom we live our lives. People creep in behind our backs and become part of our lives.' "

"Oh, he said that, did he? Good heavens, he's not very flattering. Obviously we're not good enough for him. But he mustn't be insatiable. He attacks on a broad front and it sounds very impressive. But has he an end in view . . . that's what I ask myself?"

He asked Gabriella; his mouth watering.

Without waiting for an answer, he showed his hand. These circumlocutions ended on her doorstep :

"Take yourself, for example. It strikes me you have the will and vitality to do anything you choose. Well, it's as though you put all that into backing up what you thought was a brand new philosophy of life . . . and which simply turned out to be an error of taste! Wouldn't you feel *let down*!"

Her hand flew up to cover her mouth : she realized she had in fact been discussing herself.

She thought :

‘Not only have I given him grounds for suspicion, I’ve practically conducted him down those basement steps. And without actually saying anything, he’s taken the very first opportunity to fling mud.

‘What he’s hinting is, in point of fact : “I hope you won’t do anything you are going to regret.”’

‘How perfectly I understand Gerard when he says : “Two or three evenings out among civilized people and disgust drives me back into my stable of ordure.”’

She was nettled, and looked it. In the year 1963 there is something mystical about a country where you can still frighten half the citizens under the bed by an imputation of bad taste.

And at last formed this simplicity with a very white mouth :

“What do you suggest as an alternative to this ‘error of taste’?”

He glanced at her, open-mouthed; he was being quizzed out in the open. Much as he detested sincerity which was, generally speaking, beneath him, he came out with :

“My dear girl, I’ve had you on my conscience. I really don’t like the thought of your mixing in these circles. What you need is a place of your own. Now a friend of mine who is away has left me his studio to let. Why not go along and have a look at it? I can let you have the keys and the address.”

Chapter VII

A FEW DAYS later Gerard said to her :
“I do believe that if Hankin stopped patronizing me I would lose at one blow half my identity and convictions !”

They were seated in a pub beside a red fire which snapped at them when they dug it with their shoes.

A murderous November's day was trying to get under the door with hacksaw and icepick.

Streets uttered the slurred speech of leaves torn from a madman's diary.

Passers-by were beaten up and iced by a wind that coughed like a devilish old thief, in rags and scampering on diamond toenails.

On catching sight of Gabriella, radiant as any café sinner in stockings, shoes and gloves, all black as coal, you would have said : “She thrives then—on agonies of conscience.”

Between them, on the spotted tabletop, there was a screw of paper and a bunch of keys. These had been sent round by Hankin with a plea for secrecy : ‘I don't want my dear old friends the Swingers to think I'm

interfering.' He had taken the precaution of wrapping them up carefully; with the result that they formed a shape inside the envelope which was instantly recognizable as that of a bunch of keys which has been carefully wrapped up. But no one can be absolutely certain from the outside, and so Bebette had been obliged to open the letter and re-seal it before passing it on to Gabriella—who now reviewed its contents, and answered Gerard:

"Look at Edward Hankin from this point of view. Here's the one man in England who has done me a kindness—from disinterested motives. I'm quite serious. And in return, I betray his confidence without a second thought. For *your sake*."

Which meant: 'What more can I do to appease this monstrous vanity of yours—which frightens me to death!'

This merely earned her an ugly mouth and a blasting whisper:

"How extraordinary of you . . . to think *his* confidence worthy—even of your *betrayal*!"

He began between drinking and raging, to get out a diatribe. Dropping down to kiss her hands when he was out of breath . . . like a man tipsy with solicitude, but who cannot help himself. . . .

"If you want to know why I can't stand the man, I'll tell you. He's done me a favour. And because he's so anxious to get hold of me, and look me in the eye, and assure me that it meant nothing to him, and that we are to go on as before as though nothing had happened—I can't stick the sight of him!

"And what makes it so horribly funny is that ever

since that moment I've noticed there's something squashy about his nose—in addition to what is, undeniably, a pushing stomach—and an odour of ambergris, which I seem to go on smelling all day after I've seen him!

"*He* knows quite well that to even things up I would have to bang at least twenty doors in his face.

"Since nothing else in the world can give you quite the same sort of satisfaction as banging a front-door in the face of an intelligent-looking man who's going by—possibly carrying a small parcel of books—with his ears pricked and his eyes alert to see into your house and to see what you're going to do with that little key-ring of yours which is absolutely full of silver keys! Bang! There's nothing to compare with it!"

He picked the keys off the table as though unable to wait.

Gabriella watched him as one watches a tragedian whose drama leaves no room for everyday emotions.

'He extemporizes marvellously—but only on his darkest thoughts and those of least consequence; like an eagle in a hen coop scratching up an electric storm.

'The question is: is he searching his soul at my expense? There's no time for my agonies and misgivings. They're swamped by this floodtide.

'All he requires is my presence: the rest is taken for granted.

'And all the while I'm compelled to lead a double life in order to support his singularity!'

She drew his attention to the provocative keys, and said with some amusement:

"If you want me to move, you're ruining your case you know!"

He dropped them like hot cakes; but only because "I'd forgotten who they came from."

"But of course you must leave that bawdy house."

It occurred to him to appeal to the barmaid as a third person whom he could incite to a damning verdict by jesting—in an intolerably free and easy fashion—upon the serious matters of sanitation and propriety.

"I suppose you'd look on it as an entertainment, as well? To live in a house like that, full of bedrooms that can be got in Paris for eight and six a night! The sort whose walls are painted entirely black, and whose windows open on to some damned coal face, some ventilator a few feet square—which the rook and the spider would eschew, even for their beds of ink. Am I right?" turning upon Gabriella triumphantly.

And receiving:

"What an idiot you are!"

"Oh, I don't mind them. I know them backwards. Those vents whose only sound is the rattle of an emptying latrine. Whose shutters are caked with dust which has risen up—no, not even the grime which Heaven is pleased to rain upon us—but an adulterated human dust from filthy beds, and pillows whose feathers, never properly cleaned, reek of the chicken pen!"

His barmaid made noises but was thinking it over with a great deal too much relish. And laughing heartily at his jokes as though she hadn't a moral bone in her body.

He said:

"And you know how in such places you can't sleep a wink all night... because there's a peculiar crunching

and gnawing going on, as though a rat was trying to get into your room. And someone shoulders past, straining at some burden which they're dragging about—a body or a sack of blunderbusses—you can hear it rubbing up against your cardboard door and rattling the key, which is always the key of a cathedral, until it's shaken out and hangs by a last tooth!"

At this his accomplice burst into wild guffaws of laughter.

He regretted her.

Gabriella said:

"You only tell me that it is *you* who cannot cope with the low points of existence."

"I can't? But my life is a series of low points."

This was plainly ludicrous to a woman who has just spent nine months teaching herself to walk in a temperature of 114 degrees Fahrenheit.

He fastened his eyes upon her, heavy-lidded. The tirade had been serious!

"I know you find them good company—that stable of egoists, hypocrites, toadies and careerists." He added in a low voice: "And your lewd paramour, bald as an egg, smacking his lips downstairs! I warn you, if you don't leave the place I shall come round and chrottle the old quack in his bed."

"So that's what he meant when he said you were looking for someone who would force you to surrender to yourself."

"Who isn't! But he has only touched the fringe. As a matter of fact, I feel quite angry to find my wants deliberately underestimated. And by an old fleshmonger at that!"

"Oh, I think you would have been flattered. He found them positively shocking."

"Then I shall make a point of telling him. . . ." He went to work on his forehead with the cuneiform of the branding iron. "You must look for someone who makes ordinary life physically impossible for you. And never someone you can *live* with—and blame for preventing you from making an effort."

Gabriella suddenly felt hideously overtired. Her strength melted like wax.

She said faintly :

"I can't stand being badgered like this."

When he saw the words had gone home, and he had succeeded in draining all the life out of her, he was stricken. 'Are you content, now that you've cut your empty theory in human tissue?'

Choking with apologies he wished to bring his head to her knees for a pardon gentler than an altar's.

His abject humility entailed furious denials of everything he stood for.

"It's simply that . . ." his voice broke; he pressed her gloved hand against his mouth as though stifling flames. "I *shrink* when you tell me what you have done for my sake. I implore you, whatever you do for me—do it out of *selfishness*."

They were profoundly moved: exhausted, and responding to the overwhelming attraction they exerted over one another, they exchanged by common consent, a glance of intense passionate joy.

Silence was broken only by the thudding doors.

At last Gabriella said softly :

"Do you know you talk like a man who is staving off madness?"

He answered with a trace of surprise :

"But of course."

As though there was no other way to live; like a man who keeps a pet lion and is accustomed to being clawed by it between nine and ten in the morning.

What alarmed Gabriella was that he seemed to congratulate himself only when he was out of control. 'And when I have ceased to procure that sensation for him. . . ?'

They went off to find a bus stop.

Urchins came touting for coppers with a Guy Fawkes in a box. In their dirty skins rolled brilliant sluts' eyes, clear as drops of water.

The wind vanished. Heaven reigned in the dripping clouds, and made up loaves and bolts of white ice.

They waited in milk white fresh air.

The Chelsea traffic, plated with metals of great weight and sheen, bore away expensive London concubines who sulked or stroked the snouts of pets. Others were to be seen, loose, who, every bit as competent as upper-class Frenchwomen, gave the appearance of walking along as though they were going somewhere.

In the bus when Gerard had her against his side he was at ease with the world and his life.

He interpreted the screw of paper for her.

"It will be one of those Putney riverside houses with over-grown gardens . . . in which one goes rummaging and finds two or three inches down, a litter of Thames butterflies—masquerading as ragged pieces of silk, and

wet as lettuce, among immense beads of an aurora dew!"

"Isn't that how an estate agent passes off a white elephant?"

"I'm afraid you are alert to every commercial dodge!"

In twenty minutes they were standing before a large Victorian house with a porch which had been cuffed and gowned by spiders. It appeared deserted.

Gerard attacked the door. It yielded to the third key, and they entered a short narrow passage, in which there was one locked door, while that at the far end gave.

They found themselves treading dark brown boards, spread with a few threadbare rugs. There must have been thirty-five feet of them. The walls were lined with bookcases also sepia in colour, with glass panes fastened with tiny padlocks.

The furniture was sparse and austere. The single object which hinted at the slightest degree of consideration for human comfort, was a large bed set a little out from the wall, and covered with some dark purple material of a slippery and lustrous texture.

Evidently the owner found it somewhat high to get into, since he had placed a footstool near the head. This was his sole indulgence.

In all other respects the room bore the autograph of a sober, masculine intelligence. No embellishments. It might have belonged to an abbot compelled by the idiosyncrasy of religious high office to concede—on the matter of the sumptuous bedcloth—to a highly displeasing flamboyancy totally alien to his nature.

And having come to that conclusion one drew the in-

ference that the remaining, and most striking feature of the room, had cost him some spiritual misgivings.

It consisted of an immense sheet of glass given up to the moody Thames. One could lie up against a cobalt landscape and be lit and rocked until besotted. No wine merchant could compete with such liquid tyranny of the senses. It formed an intensely distracting shop-window to this world—that is for a man devoted to extra-terrestrial considerations.

But by now the absent tenant had convinced you that you had only to look in the drawer of the high Spanish writing-desk over there to find the papal bull which had overridden his scruples.

Gerard said :

“How odd.”

“It’s forbidding.”

“Not at all. I smell a man on his knees fighting pleasure for all he’s worth. I’m beginning to feel very much at home.”

He bolted what there was in a couple of glances; and his eyes lighting on a gas fire, he went at the taps, was rewarded, and put a match to the hiss.

They stood in front of it, some distance apart, warming themselves; and in order to enjoy to the full the pleasure of being alone together, and to make it more difficult to approach one another, pretended that they were not.

Ludicrous as it sounds, each was so acutely conscious of the other that they very nearly went so far as to ignore one another. Think of all the hard work you put into being alone in a café full of people; it’s more exhausting than talking your head off. You can see two strangers in

the street, after glancing at one another with repugnance, suddenly take an inordinate interest in the traffic and in what time it is.

Gerard caught himself at it: 'What's this—do I have to catch the eye of a strange woman who wonders whether I have the strength to drag her down to my level!'

He had the impertinence to look straight at her. She seemed to be trying to control the rustle of her mackintosh as if she was in church.

'She's acting up . . . like a petty bourgeoisie . . . for the furniture!'

His heart went mad; and pounded until it shook his body to pieces. Ugly with assurance he dared her—by pouring over her brazen and scornful glances—to deny she was in love with him!

After nineteen months and five minutes of shadow-boxing he merely crossed the room toward her, too exhausted to tackle her pride or his, and embraced her.

They fell upon one another like tired animals, who have fatigue and ennui to make love for them when they pause.

When you have already wasted half your life, it seems criminal to waste another minute.

Even now this man who could scream in the streets from loneliness, took it upon himself to be alert to anything in the nature of a borrowed or automatic caress; that is, one from her marriage.

Lodged in the innermost sty of his brain was the possibility of an agonizing insult: 'Suppose this creature whom I adore more than anyone else in the world, should draw upon custom—and knowledgeably develop

a facile excitement, of which I am the auxiliary, not the initiator? It is the harlot who gives the most convincing rendering of passion; just as the journalist with an exhaustive vocabulary can imitate thought.'

And this preoccupation of his made him so coarse-grained that it was only when he had her shuddering against his side with her hair loose that it occurred to him she was terror-stricken.

Convinced of his ability to wipe out all her fears, he asked :

"But of what?"

"Of some punishment even more frightful . . . than the last."

She was making him the instrument of a brooding and implacable fate, intent on retribution !

He understood this piece of savagery so well that his heart turned over.

He called her his dove, his lamb, his lily; and binding his arms round her he tried to set her mind at rest. In seconds he found for her arguments which he had been years in seeking for himself.

With a cunning only possible to one supremely well informed on the nature of such fear, he undertook all the haggling, the rudimentary bargaining that goes on between mankind and the elemental powers—for possession of her limbs, still as white as those of a favourite, save where they had been scorched at throat, arm, and thigh, as though by the pitiless flames of Heaven in her headlong fall from grace.

But she, who regarded logic as a goad with which you teased the Fates in order to get them to show their claws, was frightened nearly out of her wits.

And made love as if the end of the world were half an hour away; so that he was completely maddened, and the purist lost to his senses.

Grilled by the fire, they woke from their amorous catalepsy to darkness.

A thick fog had come up and drenched their window with drifting shrouds and poultices that smoked with active bacteria.

Nothing stirred. Toads sat in thickets on their oilskin hands.

The whole city sweated in widow's weeds; which here and there had been slashed and devilled with mustard coloured light.

One would say that some expert safe-breaker had entered London and thrown drugged meat to the dogs, the railways, and the river-craft: they spoke with muffled voices as from deep sleep in vaults choked with fumes.

Sublime, diabolic, opium fogs!

Quite suddenly a clock began to tick from somewhere in the mysterious depths of the room.

They started. And began to talk together with a low-toned recklessness.

Gabriella, alert to all the forces that were abroad, accepted the fog, the silence, and the ticking clock as unmistakable signs of the displeasure of her invisible adversary. And resigned herself to her fate.

She was calm, and even gay, as people are in a crisis of the first magnitude. Her gentleness had an air of finality about it.

So that Gerard who yesterday would have said: "I warn you, I shall never take you in my arms as if I

were concluding an international pact!" was filled with a yearning which he could satisfy only by telling himself that it was now impossible for her ever to leave him.

She withheld nothing. What did he expect—a timorous swooning culprit who would beg him to tell her whether he didn't think her cheap?

Instead he received confessions that unbalanced him :

"The fact that you managed to work well all day froze my heart. Because it meant that you had completely dismissed me from your mind."

"What do you think it was like for me? The moment you set foot in this country it was all I could do not to rush round to the house and seek you out. I counted the minutes until I could drop in casually on Bebette. I even took to walking the streets on the off chance that I should see you. The house, the address, the district where you lived were so mysterious to me that if I came anywhere near them my knees turned to jelly, and I was afraid of collapsing."

"But the moment I smelled London—the most dangerous smell in the world, that bite in the air, that dirt in the streets—I found myself looking for you automatically."

"Then why did you have to put me through the mill like this?"

"I tried to set up an alternative existence. I trained myself to live in a deep rut. But on rainy nights my heart failed me. You don't know how mournfully the rain patters on the skylight when you are alone."

"Don't I?"

He showed her eyes which put all her sufferings in

the shade. One would say they were intoxicated by a bottomless pit.

This exotic submissiveness—bread for the soul of a vain man—from a woman who had hitherto been a model of caution, made him uneasy. He experienced the beatitude of a conqueror who can bear anything but his victories. Besides, he detected a conclusive note : and a semi-religious ardour in her admissions.

It appeared to him as though she had been imbued by the absent tenant of the room with an atrocious grasp of the potentialities of sin, possible only to the religious elect, who find vice indispensable if they are to put an edge upon innocence.

And was determined to raise her embraces to the level of heroism !

At that moment there was a thunderous knocking on the front door. Her guilt quickly assumed monstrous proportions. And she fell back, listening to it with her head on one side as if crackling coals were falling upon her eardrums.

Chapter VIII

SOMEONE WAS shaking the outer door as though it was a tambourine. Presently they paused, one imagined them to be listening, and set upon it again, maddened and raining blows indiscriminately.

"Open it," said Gabriella, as though her last hour had come.

"I shall do no such thing."

There was a second even more ominous pause, succeeded by a faint click. The flap of the letterbox had been pushed open and through it the Doctor's voice addressed them from the outer world.

"I know you're in there!"

At this sublime bathos, straight out of the fourth form, which came booming down the passage to them, Gerard was seized by a convulsion of mirth.

'My God, he's incurable! He's out there in the dark crouching down upon his powerful thighs! Why—with his consuming interest in other people's affairs and his conviction that nothing is beneath him, there's no end to his talent for making himself amusing!'

There was a breathy interval. The Doctor puffed through the mouthpiece.

'Abominable! He's got nothing better to do than to puff at us like a pig at a compost heap. Go home, you bogus lady-killer!'

"Gabriella! Can you hear me?" shouted the Doctor.

She was agitated, and seemed to be on the point of answering.

"Gabriella, I am going down on my knees to you," said the Doctor in heart-rending tones.

There was a noise suitable to a man going down upon his knees.

'Oh this is absolutely beastly,' thought Gerard. 'He's a scalliwag of the first order and is going to glue himself to the doorstep and bleat until we let him in.'

The Doctor at once put on an altogether different voice: noble and ringing.

"Do you think I am doing this for fun? I am not a young man," he added slyly. "Listen to me, Gabriella. I know that you are pure. You do not understand . . . you are in danger with that young man. He is what we call *un canard*, a filthy creature, he is not normal. Bebette has been telling me things about him which I did not know. . . ." And with the full force of his lungs: "He is a low character—if you don't believe me ask him whether he has a *police record*!"

Gerard uttered an explosion of rage which must have been audible to the Doctor. He was half-way to the door when Gabriella caught hold of him.

"Let me go out and break his neck."

There were sounds as of a hasty getting to feet, and of fleeing footsteps. Then silence. Then a voice wailing

in the distance : "Gabriella !" The Doctor had shot his bolt and was retiring into the fog.

Gerard could hardly contain himself :

"In the fog, in the darkness, he drives across London to mouth slander through a letterbox—why he needs kicking in the teeth !"

He saw that she had recovered from the initial shock, and was inclined to make light of it.

It even appeared to have done her good. A grave mouth can be made ravishing by certain devilish little movements when they culminate in this :

"Now you know that in order to enjoy to the full the unique pleasure of being English without actually going abroad, you must have a good tally of mad foreigners and tormentors crouching, hurt and puzzled, in the wings of your life !"

He was enchanted.

"Oh, you think he's rapidly becoming indispensable to us ? I must say I felt a twinge of guilt in the matter of the 'police record'. Is it fair of us to unhinge continentals by pointing out that this is held in high esteem over here ? And that there is even some question whether those connected with the arts who *lack* such credentials can ever expect to be taken seriously by their fellows. I felt a perfect swine when he brought it out !"

He privately congratulated himself on having despatched the Doctor with a mortal blow which made it extremely doubtful whether he could ever be considered again as a person, let alone as a man.

'And I owe him an even greater debt,' he said to himself, 'not only has he saved me from the necessity of making a fool of him, by doing it for himself—he has

provided exactly the diversion needed to take her out of herself : he has *vulgarized* our relationship . . . and for that it is I who should go down on my knees to him. She has lost her desperate courage. One would say she had come out of a little low-ceilinged punishment cell.'

He watched her at her peacockery like a black-browed loiterer who makes an art of being unemployed—or rather, has the habit of drunkenness.

The lightest sound of her stockinged feet was picked up by the commodious room.

'We have humanized the room : it no longer oppresses her. Provided I have nothing inauspicious to contend with, and can keep things on an even keel—she's mine.'

She gave him a glance from her eyes—diamonds that keep packed in ice their great blond embers . . . where the lightning still licks ! And fixing them on the floor, began to put a little tortoise-shell comb through her hair—which lit up and spat current through the teeth.

'How can a woman so exceptional lower herself to the level of a serving-wench by making her brain a sponge for every superstition ? How terribly circumscribed are the lives of fatalists, to whom everything must occur *by accident*. All her movements are regal, tranquil. Perhaps it would be nearer the mark to say : she believes passionately in the sovereign power of her will—so much so that events, even Nature herself, wait upon a misuse of it.'

His blood ran cold at the thought.

'I have staked everything on a creature who is at the mercy of vague fears and caprices ! And yet I must

succeed with her: she alone can liberate me from all other appetites. I would rather fail on this level, than succeed on any other.

‘With her I need never bend my knee to the English way of life, which kills life—and which exactly resembles an old-fashioned madhouse, full of clamps, restraints, and booby traps, where the inmates feel a moral obligation to drag one another down, suck one another’s blood and put out one another’s eyes!

‘I shall be exempt from the clammy handshakes of society whose touch is leprosy for the soul!

‘Above all I need her so that I may lose all ambition. Never let me attain a position of petty authority in the world . . . so that I may remain master of myself . . . so that I may *go on hating!*’

Thoughts which tore him to pieces.

It seemed to him that she was already slipping out of his grasp.

Mulish and imperious, he placed himself in front of her and accused her of avoiding his eye.

“I must know what this has been for you—an escapade?”

She was ravaged.

“Forgive me! But don’t you see, for you, it could be a temporary expedient for loneliness. Whenever I’m talking to you I feel I’m fighting some mad battle all alone. You are always closing your eyes and hiding.”

She answered in a voice that wasted away:

“Why did you choose me for your obsession? You terrify me. You watch me as though I was the answer to the riddle of the Universe.”

“Ah, so you know that!”

Imagine the desperate satisfaction of a man who has been eating his heart out.

He said immediately :

"Then you must also know that people pass each other by a hair's breadth—by a hair's breadth lives are ruined. Now you will have to make the break . . . and come to me."

Finding her speechless, he threw aside all caution, and like one demented :

"So you've thought it over—and decided I won't do ! Did you really think I hadn't noticed you looking at me out of the corner of your eye, and saying to yourself : 'Yes, overtip the taxi, by all means. I shall of course despise you for it. But I shan't scrub you out for that. My tests are concerned with provisions . . . a lifetime of provisions, embraces, cups of tea, and enough sentiment to make a marriage.' Those tests you are applying to me—I want to fail every one of them !"

She thrust him off—literally to save herself from a wild beast. The attack was so unexpected, coming in the midst of her soft and doll-like contentment, that she was convulsed. She tried to speak : her throat was so painful it might have been scalded with pitch . . . it had to be coerced to give passage even to breath, and you mixed in words when you could :

"It is not that I am not strong enough to make the break . . . but that you—are not man enough to make a decision. . . ."

He listened, staring and open-mouthed, as though he expected to drop at her feet, nameless and worn out like an old coat.

Until she gravelled him by adding :

"I know that when you talk away to me it's because you're trying to find out what you really want."

They were interrupted by renewed noises from the front door. This time it sounded exactly as though a cat was trying to get in: there was a realistic scratching and mewling. Even supposing the Doctor had returned and was prepared to go to such preposterous lengths to gain access—the performance was most extraordinarily lifelike, and must have been very taxing for an elderly man.

Gerard went for it—foaming.

A tabby cat ran in through his legs, entered the room, and vanished into a corner.

He returned, and ventured to try the light switch.

The great room was flooded with light. He felt a curious reluctance to examine it in its new aspect since he had made a familiar of it by firelight.

Gabriella, turned to stone, gazed at him.

"The cat," he said, going after it as though it was in the category of a witness, and must be got rid of.

It was over there, by the window, purring and rubbing itself up against something in the high-backed arm-chair which was turned slightly away from them to face the river.

As he approached, he noticed there were some leather straps—which might have been those used to make fast clothing in a suitcase or even, since they were of very fine leather with buckles, part of the harness, the reins perhaps of a child's pony—which had been dropped carelessly over the back of the chair.

Looking over the top only mildly inquisitive, he was struck dumb with astonishment on beholding an object

so out-of-place, so macabre, and yet so closely resembling an elaborate precision-made toy, which you cannot immediately identify but which you know to be desirable on account of the complexity of its springs and hinges, minted from glittering ores and anointed with oils as fine as butter, that when you come to think of it there is, after all, no more likely place for it than a studio living-room.

But which was in this instance an artificial leg, very clean like a new kettle, and half-dressed; that is, to the extent of a short navy-blue sock and an oldish black shoe, tightly laced and tied with a bow.

While he was making his astonishing discovery the tabby cat continued to sound all the gutturals of pleasure against this piece of ironmongery. And in such a way as to suggest that the leg had only very recently been deposited there, and that in spite of the evidence of its eyes, the animal's senses continued to assure it that at any moment it would receive the customary salutation and fondling.

So that Gerard began to look about uneasily, on the assumption that the owner could not be far off, whether he had crawled away of his own accord or been carried.

Suppose he had been sitting there very quietly in the room with them all the time? What about the locked door?

Or was he being trundled half-way across London by some slut-eyed urchins who had laid hold of him and made an original of him by splicing his ear with a touch of blue paper?

At all events he wanted to keep it from Gabriella. But she was suspicious, joined him, and saw for herself.

They examined the room : it was empty.

Next, it was perfectly natural for him to turn his attention to the bookcases—to get a rough indication of what sort of man he was, this disabled ascetic of theirs.

One couldn't help admiring the binding of some of the volumes, which had a positively succulent glitter—the green morocco leather, for instance, was as rich as a stick of angelica.

On the other hand, as he began to read the titles, he found himself somewhat at a loss. Possibly because he *imagined* he would be reading dry as dust theological works, it was some time before it came home to him that what in fact met his eye was something very different . . . was so far removed as to be at the opposite end of the pole.

Although once you have noticed the similarities between sacred and profane literature, you are hard put to distinguish between them : on the highest level, body and soul meet as equals.

Thus to those without the benefit of religious instruction and who are therefore at the mercy of their intelligence, divine poetry reads like a recipe for an aphrodisiac.

'Amazing,' thought Gerard, 'he has scoured the world and spent a fortune.'

Running his eye over the cases professionally like a doctor going over the medicine chest of a woman who has spent her last farthing on her nervous system, he was compelled to respect such a single-minded pursuit of obscenity.

On the whole he saw no reason to revise his original

estimate: 'This is no porcine Nero. The room is still a jail; and the owner, a prisoner of his senses.'

Instead he was gripped by a sudden distaste for the throaty droning of the cat, which was behaving in such an absurd fashion. And took it up roughly by the scruff, preparatory to throwing it out.

Once he was on his way out with it, he began to see the funny side of the affair.

The room was nothing short of diabolical, since its disguise of ecclesiastical virtue was exactly calculated to further its true nature: namely to fill them with sufficient guilt and foreboding to put an unbearable intensity into every caress—by forcing them to steal one another in the face of Heaven!

It appealed to him as being irresistible . . . 'that fate should handle two of the most ardent fatalists with such exquisite mockery!'

In an instant:

'Why, I'm in possession of a priceless weapon: ridicule. Here's a means of ridding her of all those hair-raising fears which prey upon her mind. She can't fail to be struck by the humour of it. Were any pair of idiots twitted more perfectly? This is on the scale of an omniscient pleasantry!'

And he called back over his shoulder:

"Do you know that we have stumbled on a pornographic library!"

He succeeded in paralysing her.

She recoiled from the walls with nausea, as from tainted foodstuff. Instinctively she moved her shoulders as though the flesh on them crawled like borrowed clothing which was not quite clean.

For the first time she smelled the place.

There was a dreadful staleness to the air. But it was by no means devoid of life: mortification had set in. Furniture which appeared solid was seen on inspection to be riddled with woodworm—and could be crumbled like biscuit. As fast as it was being eaten away by one form of life, only a little higher up another form was hard at work adding shawls and mantles of moist cobwebs to the most outstanding features.

But to aid and abet life on the lowest of all its levels—there were bookshelves crammed with informed depravity upon the vileness of man.

Her deed stank in her nostrils.

Everything that had been rapturous and illicit was poisoned by walls that *countenanced* her acts.

How subtle was the intervention of the Unseen to use these means of defiling what she had done. (The lighter side of adultery is its misconception of its own importance.)

Once she had hit on this line of reasoning, there was no holding her. She shuddered like a devout peasant.

She felt as though every embrace had been hatched *first* in the shelves about her.

‘Stagnant! Putrid!’

She wanted to shout it out, and run headlong down the street. With a primitive’s detestation of all that is abnormal, she longed for the security of Swinger’s house. The noisy stairs where you were sure to meet either Bebette with her splendid, nagging tongue, or the Doctor—energetic, kind-hearted buffoon—who would immediately accuse you of not having given him a thought since breakfast—how light-heartedly you

mounted them! And the way they ordered their affairs in that house—wasn't it the most natural and carefree way of going on that you could possibly wish?

Gerard returned to find a woman flushed and demoralized, who execrated herself, who shunned him—and was on the point of fainting with horror.

He got her out of the place, rolling her eyes like a child in a nightmare, and with wildly chattering teeth. She replied incoherently, and was too far gone for rational explanation.

He left her for two minutes to go back and extinguish the fire and lock the door. The blend of sympathy and esteem he felt for the owner—who had left a sixth of himself in the armchair—caused him to perform these duties with scrupulous care. The den of the old lion distilled an influence as powerful as that of a doctor's waiting room which could keep a dead man upright and turning magazines.

Putting the key into the lock, he sighed for his pedestrian mistress. He felt morose and pessimistic to a degree . . . in fact he was so low he could only just prevent himself from bursting out into roars of laughter. "It's scandalous! It's hilarious!"

Chapter IX

WHEN TWO Englishmen are in conversation suppose one of them forgets himself to the extent of finishing his sentences, the other will instantly begin to sweat: 'Damn and blast him—is he going to tell me the story of his life?' an almost supernatural hatred sweeps over him: 'Of course, it's difficult to be brief—when you have nothing to say.'

But let two foreigners babble up and down the corridors all night and the same man feels the whole structure of his life to have been enriched. The louder they howl the more certain he is that he's an emotional man. 'Well, thank God the stigma of a cold-blooded race can't be applied to me.' It's all he can do to refrain from joining in.

So that when the Doctor returned home and began one of his tremendous scenes with Bebette, Hankin was on the spot to enjoy the most natural and carefree way of going on that you could possibly wish.

Actually he was in one of his naïve moods, exemplified in summer by references to the Serpentine as 'The Lido', and in winter by a return from a London market

with something in a paper bag which he wanted to talk about. In this instance some lily bulbs which he was going to rear in his centrally heated flat.

When Bebette said hissinglly :

"Here he comes—creeping in with his tail between his legs!" he followed her into the hall, holding the bag in one hand, and with the deportment of one eager to be in at the kill but not wishing to be battered about—a form of bearing common to so many of Bebette's bachelors that one could pick them out in the street with absolute certainty : "There's one ! Oh, they never marry. She's thrown the Swinger aspice over them."

The Doctor had already boarded the staircase and was going up like greased lightning, and contriving to look as unlike himself as possible . . . with a facility born of years and years of bolting down side streets hiding from ex-lovers.

Bebette called out sharply :

"Well, where is she?"

The Doctor halted. His shoulders registered all the surprise of a man whose name has been called on the loudspeakers in a foreign railway station.

He turned round, very white and nasty.

"She's there; with your pipsqueak genius!"

There was something horribly satisfying about the way she waited down below—like an open-mouthed pig to have its throat slit—and begged him to do or say something abominable.

Glancing down at her bosom as she always did before a row, to see whether her brooch was secure, she incited him to do his worst by saying tonelessly : "Go on."

No form of political inquisition and torture can sap

a man's resistance and break his will more thoroughly than twenty years of hearing the same woman saying: "Go on."

He broke down. He even forgot what they were arguing about. All he knew was that they were furiously angry with one another, and that it was his turn to think of something to say.

"You are a disgusting woman, do you know that?" he shouted. "Why can't you learn to be your age?"

"That's rich coming from you!" said Bebette, wading in eagerly. "It might interest you to know [always the superb formality associated with stupidity, lack of content and a breaking off of diplomatic relations] that the bank manager nearly fell off his chair the other day when I told him my age."

The Doctor uttered a harsh sneering laugh.

"Really, Bebette, half the tradesmen in the world have been earning a good living for years by falling off chairs when you tell them your age."

'Devil!' thought Hankin, applauding with all his might. 'It's all very stimulating; especially in a city where people take a pride in being their age—and not necessarily as a last resort!'

Bebette, far more astute, saw her chance.

And as though he had done something absolutely unthinkable—run naked through the streets, or cheated at cards—turned her head away, unable to bear the sight of him.

"... what a cheap way ... to make fun of me."

Hankin showed alarm; evidently he had been backing the losing side. He looked in vain at the Doctor: 'Quick, justify yourself, man.'

Swingler promptly went purple: she had impugned his honour! He descended a few steps, raving and stamping.

"You say that to me! When you are a coarse, shameless woman who will go with anybody, with *anybody*!" Watching his glossy skull wagging away up there was pathetic, yet miraculous, like watching an egg trying to hatch itself. At last he managed to hit on something to say:

"You have such good taste, you know that what makes him so unusual is that there are only two hundred thousand more exactly like him—right down to their dirty boots and their stupid machines for rolling up cigarettes!"

Is there anything more profoundly moving and tragic than the rage of a man who is accustomed to being found ridiculous, and who is still ridiculous?

He roared:

"Do you think I could not smell him a mile off? And yet I put up with him for your sake . . . with his little ways," a terrific leer, "so intelligent and so anxious to get to the bottom of himself that he simply has to be rude to you, or shut his mouth up like a trap or gasp with boredom like a fish out of water— isn't it original to behave like that! Yes, madam, what a nice shy boy who knows how to draw attention to himself by hiding his light under a bushel!"

For a moment it looked as though he would asphyxiate himself with pleasure at having got this out. Sweat poured off his brow.

Evidently it was deceptive; and he was well under control.

For so saying, his face became impassive, almost vacant, and he bent over them in silence and parted his lips; it is the courteous attitude of a stranger who has stopped you in the street to ask the way.

Sensing that he was about to deliver the *coup de grâce*, Hankin craned forward as far as decency would allow—bearing in mind that he did not mix in these circles, but only dined out on them.

Instead of an attack—selective, personal and biting—or even: “Can you tell me the way to Cannon Street Station?” the Doctor surprised everyone, including himself, by emitting an unwelcome grunting noise and falling full length down the remaining stairs, banging himself about regardless of noise or delicacy, and coming to rest at Bebette’s feet.

She stared at him, stupefied.

Once you have formed a derogatory opinion of someone everything they do thereafter simply confirms it: they seem to go on damning themselves, not knowing you have apprized them in the meantime.

So Bebette looked as though she thought he had gone much too far; and that she had been warning people about this sort of thing all her married life . . . rather as she might warn them about a man who had once made advances to her in a railway carriage: “And I’ve never trusted a man with that colouring since.”

Hankin had stepped back smartly to give the Doctor plenty of room for his recreation and was holding up his lily bulbs in the way you do when you have pulled something out of the sawdust of a lucky dip and intend to hang on to it.

Both of them came to their senses.

Frightened to death, Hankin went for the telephone.

Bebette, who in a sense had been specially exerting herself to entertain Hankin, was in a piteous condition. She got down on her knees, and hopelessly incompetent, fumbled with her husband's collar like some raw servant girl who is trying to unpack the napkins which have been wedged in among the other things in a picnic lunch.

The Doctor's face was horrific; his tongue protruded.

After hearing him so often discuss his heart as though it was something precious sewn into the lining of his coat which he was guarding from enemy agents, she laid her ear in fear and trembling against his breast.

Far away in the distance she could hear something moving about and rapping on the thick walls like a miner stopped up in the earth . . . an underling on whom gas and water and darkness are gaining rapidly, but who continues to try and make contact with the outside world, in spite of all the evidence which points to the fact that there is *no way out*. She was reassured by this universal complaint. And tried to rearrange his body in a way that was more congenial to her. There are laws governing decorous positions for the human body in sickness and in health, as there are for deploying cushions on a sofa.

And the first thing that occurs to any nicely bred person is to try and put the body in order. To wrestle with it a little, if need be against its will, in order to get it down from the excruciating position into which it has selfishly flung itself, head first, and which you can't look at without getting a feeling of paranoia, and of having

had your head wrenched right round to bring you into focus with it.

Later, an affable pink doctor arrived and set everyone's mind at rest.

The Doctor had had a stroke. But no one was to alarm themselves; there were a great many at this time of the year. It was exactly the weather for it. It was true that he had bitten through his tongue, but a few stitches would take care of that, and he would be able to talk again in a few days.

He was so breezy and good-natured he should have been put away for life.

Some of the students who had been compelled to step over the Doctor to go upstairs, assisted in carrying him into the ground-floor room and laying him out on the ottoman; where he was made up into a bed.

In spite of the special acoustic properties of the house, not a sound was heard after this. The smell of fried fish went abroad. Outside the front door you could not see your hand before your face.

Bebette sat up with her prostrate libertine, wrapped in a red dressing-gown, crying, or drinking brandy from a cup and gazing into nowhere . . . like bunched up moribund imperatrice, with lips as cold as dice.

Towards nine o'clock a key was put into the front door and halting steps passed along the corridor and upstairs. It was Gabriella returning like a drowned rat . . . with the strange tallow flesh of the fog-eater who moves as though risen from a bed of morphine, with hair matted by a pillow soaked by delirium and by the dew tides of the unearthly streets.

The footfall of the sinner returned from her liaison

had an incalculable effect upon Bebette. In an instant she was as stiff as a civet cat; her eyes glowed in their red lids.

So horribly still was the house, one would say the occupants were all lying behind doors with their throats cut. The silence of a noisy house has, as it were, a thicker pile than any other.

Gabriella began her ascent loaded with dread.

It was like climbing up into an ear, which is listening to you intently.

There are still one or two people going about who are incapable of crawling to themselves. These misfits resist everything life has to teach them.

While the rest of mankind has learned to enrich its sensibility by forcing it down a peg every day, until it's low enough to cope with anything—they are left behind, still pacing up and down their rooms at night, occupied with some trifling irregularity; embezzlement, for example, or adultery.

Gabriella barricaded her door against possible assault from the Doctor. And spent the hours of the night like someone trying to escape from the clutches of a great book—hypnotized, getting up and walking into things.

Anyone who knows these rooms—with their truckle divan, bit of rag on the floor, cooking 'facilities', basin with a wooden hood, and electric bulbs that make you yellow as a monkey—will also know that you can board yourself up in them and suffer in a way that has quite gone out of fashion. Nothing forms character like a dirty basin and a crazy wooden chair with a seat of braille.

By going through a lot of highly coloured nonsense, she bled herself white by the early hours.

Even to try and collect your thoughts after such an episode is like putting water through your veins when they have been accustomed to alcohol.

Now and then she recovered herself and got a sight of reality; as you do when the piece of music, or the human being, who has taken you by force, loosens its grip just long enough for you to find out that you have been sobbing uncontrollably.

The instant she felt the ground under her feet, she said: 'This is too much . . . I have outgrown the picaresque adventure.' As though she had lost her bearings, and let herself into the wrong room and instead of her clothes and books and open windows filled with sunshine—she was in a dark, old fashioned lodging-house, living someone else's life, full of subterfuge, among detestable people, in monstrous rooms, and suffering agonies which had nothing to do with her.

At these moments she reeled.

'What have I done? *And for a second time.*'

She saw everything in its true perspective: a hard light poured down upon events. She was craven. Moments of revelation which sometimes occur when you catch yourself in the middle of a sentence . . . having talked a lifetime's nonsense.

But which pass immediately.

And while she was still fixed in an attitude of horror, her imagination had already passed on to absorb itself in the nature of Gerard's obsession:

'There's something I mistrust in the quality of his fixation. Is this the love of a healthy sane man?

'I am not even an extension of his personality—but an escape route; a new drug which melts his brains.

'He is not trying to find an answer to life, but a way out of it. He's under pressure not from society, not from his work, not from his dreams—but from the self, squeaking away inside him night and day: "You're not burning up life fast enough!"

'What have we in common but a transforming madness—and who will give two straws for that six months from now? Will I have anything left but marvellous wreckage?

'I am too unsure of myself for a relationship to take hold which runs counter to established laws.

'What it amounts to is this: I would rather occupy five hours of his life on which he looks back with regret, than try to build a future on the quicksands of that temperament.

'For this reason alone, what I have done is morally wrong.'

By Monday morning you had a city reeking under badly lighted Heavens.

The Metropolis was clad in mildew, alive with glittering ooze and great fever clouds.

It was the funeral couch of a buried Pharaoh who has been wrapped up like a black-shirted vegetable in mouldy linens, crêpes, plasters and aprons, steeped in the preserving vinegar of ancient curses. And loaded with the cookery of dark cosmetics, surrealist lavas, enamels, and armoury as fragile as the metal blisters on the sides of roasted fish.

People shook hands as though they had them buried up to the shoulder in earth.

The air was foul as in a gambling den, where everything is greasy to the touch.

One heard the railways shaking their chains.

But not so far away the sky opened for an instant over the Thames, to dry streets of shiny platters where the rank mane of Neptune lay overnight.

An interesting black day began.

Bebette struck terror into a household celebrated for its merriment and 'goings-on' by appearing with a brown mob-cap on her head.

The Doctor had recovered consciousness.

A number of semi-private articles had been assembled on the gimcrack table at his bedside. An intimate looking sponge-bag with a draw string and pouches; a piece of soap on a doily; something rolled up that could have been a bib . . . and after that one instinctively looked away, because if you gaze at one of these tables long enough, never mind who it belongs to, sooner or later some teeth are going to materialize, either in twos or threes or a whole set of them laughing in a glass of water.

As soon as he was fully in possession of himself, the Doctor took in the circumstances of his downfall with perfect calmness.

It was only when his eye alighted on his wife in a mob-cap that he became seriously alarmed, and tried to cry out with horror.

Bebette, who was expecting that that was exactly what would happen as soon as he was aware of his condition, was very satisfied.

She immediately washed him; while he was still too weak to defend himself.

It may be thought that by dressing her hair in such a fashion at a crisis in her life she was succumbing to the more backward side of her nature; although no one can deny that informed sources have held for centuries that the Deity is particularly susceptible to hairdressing and may be taken unawares and thrown into a state of happy confusion by someone obstinately refusing to cut a hair of their head, and adding a turban for greater effect, or by suddenly cutting the whole lot off at once. At the very least you gain His attention.

Bebette brought up the kitchen slate, and put the slate pencil into the Doctor's hand.

He understood; and lay there for some time holding it, and thinking. After a while he carefully wrote down his own name: 'Bodo Swinger'.

She came and stared over his shoulder: doubt took hold of her, she looked into his eyes.

Without moving a muscle, he stared back and wrote down 'go away' in German.

This annoyed her so much that she began to dust the room in a manner calculated to get his back up; dragging things about to make them squeak, and spitting on marks and rubbing them out like a vile old char-woman. He laced his fingers, and bore it. Finally she threw a whole bucketful of coal on the fire, rather as a waitress who has been clattering knives at your elbow in a restaurant to get you to move, suddenly amalgamates all her cutlery in one basket with a terrific crash, in a final bid for your table.

At ten o'clock Hankin appeared on the doorstep,

spick and span, wearing a red carnation and offering to undertake light duties. In times of illness it is an understood thing that the little courtesies you owe your friends no longer obtain : you may call when you like, and sit there poking their fire until you have got it just right, eating their grapes and reading the magazines you have brought them.

He drew up a chair. Bebette disappeared to the kitchen to make invalid pap.

Seeing himself hemmed in on all sides, the Doctor gave his visitor a glance of unmitigated contempt, and was engaged in writing down rude things on his slate in order to get rid of him, when Gabriella came in.

Chapter X

SWINGLER FIXED her with a blood-red glare, which attempted to riddle her with shot. Then he narrowed his eyes, and screwed them up a little as though he was still trying to see through a letterbox on the other side of London—and was still considering her as a possible ‘human being’—but finally dismissed her as beneath scorn, and cast his eyes up to Heaven as he did when someone failed to please him.

Hankin watched this dumb-show, devoured by curiosity. He couldn’t help asking her what on earth she had been up to, to upset the Doctor like this?

Preoccupied and on edge, she appeared not to have heard. The Doctor, tucked up on the ottoman, polishing a slate, and rolling his eyes at the ceiling was distraction enough.

She asked :

“What has happened to him?”

Hankin, a model of restraint, hummed and hawed : he didn’t want to come right out with the plain unvarnished truth in front of his dumb friend. He used his tongue as a clapper; like a politician explaining some

fishy manoeuvre to the great British public with words.

Whenever he said anything, the Doctor forcibly denied it on the slate.

Or gazed bitterly at him. Hankin was one of those people it is impossible to offend, since there is no level on which an insult can take hold.

In the end, he managed to put the worst possible complexion on things.

Gabriella's imagination, already overwrought, drew horrific pictures of what had occurred. Just as you conceive people (particularly women), in the hours when you are forbidden to go and call on them, and during which they remain alive but not in a fit state to receive anyone—in an exaggerated condition of undress, when they remove their wigs and corsets, and something appalling takes place, chins and stomachs drop and they are obliged to immobilize themselves in baths of wax to avoid falling apart altogether.

The Doctor wrote down: 'claptrap.'

Listening to Hankin was as stimulating as being told the plot of a play by someone who hasn't seen it.

He said cattily:

"He's been overdoing it for some time... lifting things, I understand, and eating at odd hours, not proper food, sometimes just lumps of bread..."

The Doctor could hardly believe his ears. No one took the slightest notice of his discomfiture. He blew down his nose; made his pencil squeal and grind. And was reduced, like a playwright, to a downright, 'Ha-ha!'

"I don't have to tell you," said Hankin, stealing a roguish glance at his victim, "that he's still very much 'all there'! You can't take me in, you know," he added

kindly, as though he had caught the Doctor napping, on the verge of imbecility, but by exerting himself had managed to get through to him. He implied that the Doctor wasn't really 'trying'; but that *he* personally wasn't going to let him get away with it.

Swingler tried to catch his eye, like a wretched dog which is tied up and wants to embarrass you.

Hankin promptly called out :

"But no more physical jerks, do you understand !"

And disgraced him once and for all.

Gabriella grasped that the illness was well enough established for the Doctor to have begun to collect things and look sour.

'It's been going on long enough to have made him petty—he keeps adjusting the bedclothes like an old frump with a slippery shawl. That's a good sign.

'There's not a single gesture of his that's not idiotic : yet he's worth ten Hankins. Like a great clown he's taken out a patent for a make-up that only allows him to laugh or cry.

'For Hankin, sincerity is only one of the many branches of insincerity. He wouldn't dream of going out of his way to show me I'd disgusted him—besides, he wouldn't know it until he'd taken the pulse of twenty of his friends.

'After that, I grant you, he'd work hard to keep his opinion fresh by getting all the rest to disagree with him !'

And she eyed Hankin with such boldness, that he was amazed : 'She's going to brazen it out ! Oh well, two can play at that game. Besides I want my keys, plus a definite yes or no. But not in public ; or I shall have

everything laid at my door—enticement of the wench included! Let's see if she can take the hint and step outside. . . .'

He flattered himself that in the matter of the keys he had killed two birds with one stone: acquitted himself of a slight moral responsibility, and let a 'difficult' studio to a 'suitable' tenant.

He led off with some teasing medical patter:

"I've always been lucky enough to hit on someone like the Doctor here (the Doctor wrote down: 'Traitor and Bloodsucker' and read it back with pleasure), who quotes Goethe, tells me there's nothing a zabaglione won't cure, and invents all sorts of excuses for me—never mind what I've been up to! Sometimes I'm even tempted to say to myself . . . now, what sort of behaviour could I adopt, for which there's simply no excuse at all! Don't you find it a bit tiresome—I mean, the modern bedside manner that takes everything out of your hands?"

Bungling malice, so coarse that it earned him a sharp:

"You are referring to my visits to the doctor?"

"But of course!"

She replied shortly:

"I was even luckier. I had something wrong with me, but was able to escape with nothing worse than a few scratches. After keeping me waiting for an hour, an orthopaedic surgeon drew kisses on my leg with a compass, and deeply regretted that he must deprive himself of the happiness of fitting me with a surgical boot."

'Have I found an opponent worthy of me!' thought Hankin, trying not to laugh.

"Bravo! That's the spirit!" he said buoyantly. "I

see you have the knack of making a joke of your misfortunes." He instantly looked solemn, and broached the ticklish question: "That is why I thought of you, because do you know a certain friend of mine—I believe I mentioned him to you?—lost a leg in the war, but such is his personal charm and elegance that you would never suspect it from his manner. I think you might have something in common."

The face of this pussycat-in-chief read plainly: 'Unless you are in possession of expert information, the contents of those shelves is over your head. By all means, shout it from the housetops. But you will also be shouting: "I was not alone".'

Now when virtue is on a woman's side she can afford to be incautious: but equally, once she has shouldered her guilt she is invincible—and caution is beneath her.

Gabriella's contempt actually gave her time to amuse herself with the thought: 'Gerard was right. As soon as he's done you a favour that nose becomes particularly dreadful!'

She replied with extreme dryness:

"I doubt it."

'She knows!' thought Hankin, fascinated by the risk she was running.

One saw forming up beneath the infamous nose, the peevish bud of a bridge-player whose partner has overcalled her cards.

Quite suddenly Bebette appeared in the doorway, carrying a tray between two smoking-hot red hands.

At the sight of Gabriella she began to hiss through clenched teeth: "You!"

The spectacle of a mature woman showing her fangs

and spitting is very frightening. With the venom and intensity of a madame of the old school, Bebette made use of certain noises that went out with the old plumbing. . . .

'So we're in for a period of domestic retrenchment!' thought Hankin, stepping out of the way mischievously. 'When the mask of bohemia slips sideways for an instant, there are all the conventional emotions blazing away in a manner that does the heart good to see them!'

Bebette was planted upon two stout can-can legs: a black skirtlet frolicked round them. All the furies growled in her bodice, and spent themselves in sizzling between her teeth.

Red as a lobster, she sent up a great scream:

"Don't you go near him, you—!"

At this point, sobbing breath tied a ligature in her throat; and she came close to bursting.

"Now, now!" said Hankin, trying to take the tray away from her.

She resisted with all her strength, wrenched it from him and held it clattering against her bosom, breathing harshly and staring round her like a beast of the field.

One would say that the tray was associated in her mind with some sacred rite of marriage. Obviously this tray-carrying had been lying dormant in her for *years*, and had at last succeeded in breaking down all organized resistance—no doubt greatly encouraged by the whatnot on her head.

"I hope you're satisfied with what you've done!" she said to Gabriella, with the implacable logic of Bedlam—and letting every word sink in.

"Making an elderly man dance attendance on you!"

she cried. And in words replete with meaning: "*For your own ends!*"

The Doctor co-operated by adopting a more reclining attitude, and looking at Gabriella resentfully—like a stricken dancer, broken-winded, worn out, finished, tossed aside. His respiration became slow and wheezing.

Hankin, wishing to curry favour with both sides, changed his point of view with the rapidity of a society hostess sandwiching between two witty little cocktail notes, a deeply sympathetic letter of condolence.

While Bebette advanced upon her black trotters like surly clover-fed livestock. And stood in front of her husband, panting, and daring them to snatch him from her!

For a moment it looked as though she might run amuck. Her mouth had been treated hastily with a stick of red mud, and her swollen cheeks pressed round it like a chamois purse, swollen with ill-gotten gains, whose fastening is coming loose.

The Doctor exhaled low, pulmonary, bedridden noises.

Hankin instinctively took a step backward and braced himself: something hideously disagreeable was about to occur. He could not take his eyes off Bebette. "Gollys, like madmen, are so terribly alive."

Her body trembled with ardour: objects on the conjugal tray highly stimulated, rapped, or threw themselves about. While the Doctor, who had given so many women the impression he could love dramatically and without spite, peered round her skirts like a eunuch, debagged.

Gabriella had stayed put throughout the first

onslaught : a grave, difficult, fatally moral apparition—who so raised the tone of the proceedings that Hankin would have liked to have gone up to her and given her a good shaking : ‘Dash it, she’s taking the pep out of everything—by improving herself at our expense. I never met with anything so selfish. The little minx is saying : “Passion is honourable, only society is bestial.” ’

The notion of three middle-aged cosmopolitans cavorting round her in a dusty room, potty as hatters, was beginning to annoy Gabriella. She left the room.

Bebette threw down the tray, and ran after her, shrieking :

“How could you ! When he wanted to protect you as though you were his own daughter !”

Directly the room was empty, the Doctor put his hand under the pillow, whipped out a mirror and glared with morbid interest at his tongue.

“Don’t think you can get away with a thing like this !”

Bebette was now in the semi-darkness of the hall, yelling, racked by jealousy.

To all intents it was a repetition of the preceding night. The walls, fishy, gamboge, cellulosed, and scribbled upon like old menus. Someone pulling a chain upstairs. Bebette hanging over the banisters. Disappearing feet. And a plump master of ceremonies, a little too smartly got up to be out of the top drawer, more of a toastmaster cracking the whip at a below-stairs wrangle, setting the others on but not actually participating, so that when they sent down and asked the servants to make a little less noise, he could wash his hands of the whole affair.

Now when Gabriella began to climb the stairs she was on her way to Gerard.

Bebette divined it: at this moment her face became unrecognizable, gnawed by the envies of a lifetime. To get her way she would have kissed the claw of Lucifer.

Any further indictment of her rival's conduct would waste precious time: besides, there is always the annoyance of repeating yourself in a row . . . and actually losing your temper.

No. For women like Gabriella it is quite simply the *second-rateness* of adultery that makes it so difficult to swallow; they will scarcely tolerate, in addition, a lover who is third or fourth hand.

Therefore, pausing to consult with her festering desires for two seconds, Bebette lounged upon the waxed baluster rail and uttered words of repellent cunning. (A position which charged her embonpoint with the maximum of insolence.)

"I don't mind telling you now that I was surprised in your case. He's a regular visitor here of course, and very much at home as you can see. And most attractive, I grant you!" she gurgled. "But what we all find so amusing," and she couldn't help laughing outright, "is that for some unknown reason you seem to think that you're the only one! When, oh dear me, if you only knew the half of it, you'd see the funny side!"

And the mistress of the house burst her sides.

But like someone who has applauded a musical piece a little too soon, these barking hysterias were abruptly stifled. Her mouth which had blown itself wide open, drew together quivering; the murderous eyes turned to

glass; she lost her grip upon the affair . . . and motionless in a profound and dreamless reverie, allowed her life to pass over her without stopping.

Is there anything more frightful than one of a closely-knit group of friends doing something atrocious, utterly despicable; and that person being *yourself*?

Hankin identified himself with some overcoats which were hanging up in the hall; pressing in among them as though he was going to knit for his mortality one of those beds of wet blankets that you find in the outer leaves of great cabbages.

One heard the pitiful dragging of Gabriella's shoes from the gods of this wooden asylum, now going up upon the last lap of a heart-breaking errand: to pack and leave her lover.

A faint but inexorable squeaking was born upon their ears. The Doctor had just taken his pulse, and gratified to find it tip-top, was drawing up on the slate a brief list of the nutritive broths and blancmanges which would be acceptable to him.

The flames died on Bebette's cheeks. She went in to him.

Hankin' remained motionless. The shock he suffered was similar to that which occurs when someone lies to you on the telephone—with all the conviction, good faith, and decency you have so often employed yourself.

Once he was certain that the coast was clear, he padded upstairs.

On the top landing he hovered about uneasily. There were three doors on this little plateau, which was scored like an old bread board.

In the yellow twilight, he cleared his throat once or twice affectedly. And was answered by a low discourse and argumentation from overhead, as the gods began to drum their fingers on the roof. Rain fell so noisily up here that his skull felt as thin as a ping-pong ball; as though at any moment his brains would be laid open to the weather.

‘Really, what a kennel!’

And he put his nose down into his red carnation; feeling as though he was standing just below a dustbin lid and might catch bubonic plague unless he held his breath.

One of the doors had opened in the most perfect silence—it must have been tethered with nothing stronger than the hook and eye upon a woman’s dress—and there was Gabriella, confronting him.

He flushed up as though he had just had a hot drink.

She gave him a glance which would have squashed another man like a fly, re-entered her room, leaving the door ajar, and continued her packing with complete indifference.

He rode upon her displeasure as upon billows. And looked into the room, observing her light tropical clothing lying about in butters and milks; writing utensils and fresh paper on the table; and over there on a chair not four feet away, his keys together with the original screw of paper, no larger than those which contain dog powders, but considerably more lethal.

One of the chief pleasures of watching cultivated Londoners who take their emotions off the peg, is that in situations where there is no rule of thumb they invariably go wrong.

Thus, Hankin simpered. And after a few seconds, judging that some sort of accord existed between them, said chattily :

"I'm not such an old fogey that I don't know how it is—when you're dazzled by a new friend (a new friend!) and prepared to find their way of life the very one you have been seeking . . . only to find that, damn them, they are conforming to yours, aping your habits, hanging up your idiotic things on their walls!"

He expanded.

"We're all identical: *identical*. That's what makes it so depressing. In the end I used to say to myself: 'The only thing which has any meaning is the first moment of attraction between strangers: everything thereafter is farce and disillusion.'"

If he had had a grain of sense he would have heaped censure on her actions, and earned her gratitude. This base complicity revolted her.

Even now, while her spirit fluttered at its last gasp, disdain was putting a dark marker into the corner of her mouth as she heard him out: "Try to remember you're listening to a man for whom life is something put away in a drawer: who renders down the most damnable things—until they're merely conversational."

Her skylight was awash with the clear blazing down-pour. Taking the whole weight of Heaven, it seethed with white life. One could hear from all over the roof the resonant blunders of the water, one side was brilliant as a sabre, and the other dry as rusks.

Hankin sidled round the door. You see people enter cafés with this ingratiating air; particularly those who long to corner you and press their age upon you and

sportingly disclose certain details of their private lives, such as, how common their relations are, and how dreadfully thrusting.

Actually it gave him a headache being pressed up under the tiles like this; with the probability of the lid being not quite tight, like a pauper's coffin. He felt like scrambling for dry hiding places.

Immediately the keys were within easy reach, this piece of demi-garbage watched her . . . moving about with that deadly torpid loneliness—which is the loneliness of the young in great capital cities of Europe when it rains.

Cities which have become bad habits—how indispensable they are. compared with those where you have simply been happy!

He stooped, took up the keys, jingled them (I'm in no hurry) and put them in his pocket with composure.

Possibly because he knew she could not speak a word of it, he suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to round off the incident pleasantly by addressing her in French. It is one of the few perfectly spontaneous impulses Londoners allow themselves, when they feel an overwhelming desire to communicate without specifically putting anything into words. ("Your little French phrases paralyse me—exactly as though they were in some foreign language.")

But the rain was giving the rafters such a trouncing, and in the flickering water light that played over this lodging-house full of run-down foreigners, one couldn't see clearly so that he'd feel as though he were calling his wares or leaving a gratuity.

He retired. And put it down to her ill-breeding, that

for no reason at all he should find himself backing away across the creaking boards as though he was in the presence of a superior being, or had done something of which he was ashamed.

The pestilential drumming followed him all the way downstairs. He hastened as from corporal punishment.

The walls ripened visibly with watermarks. Narrow windows lashed themselves with brilliant thongs as he descended. The cosmic pummelling seemed to have been going on for an eternity; and not a soul was to be seen. They were all shut up in cupboards, locked up in bedrooms, weeping and packing their clothes, while the whole establishment rotted like a drowned locker full of bones.

'How can one help the young of today? When they're so callow and blasé they don't know how to behave? Ten minutes of their company and you sink so low, you hardly recognize yourself.'

At six Gerard converged on the house in a taxi.

He rode the padded bone-shaker like some Lord of the underworld at holiday, whose brain is idling upon intended crime while he breaks flowers with a rich mouth.

The rain was coming down harder than ever. Only youths were about with their heads of lustrine impasto, and the plump muscle of sleep under their eyes.

The house had settled down steeply upon its foundations under a darkening sky. You heard the brook-music of its gutters as they tossed off the water. The eaves shed wealth like the timber oars of a state barge.

As luck would have it he was admitted by one of the students.

Once inside the temperature was sub-tropical, dustier than ever, and with every window steamed up.

There was a general air of frivolity and abandonment. Doors kept opening to ripples of laughter, and being forced shut again. From the basement came the snap and crackle of frying; and the pinging of stringed instruments.

One assumed that hitherto the delinquent tenants had been cramming to pass examinations, and having failed to do so, were thrown back upon the grim realities of life. But had taken it with a good grace—and submissively put their feet up in drinking parlours, acquainted their fingers with the golden stoppers upon saxophones, and finally reconciled themselves to shaking wooden rattles filled with beans which go 'cha-cha-cha'.

He launched himself at the stairs.

Really he was feeling very much at home. And the disorderly rumpus behind doors was not distasteful to him; on the contrary he was perfectly in tune with it.

'Only the gross, the trivial, and the popular can move me tonight!'

With every light-hearted bound he thought there was more and more to be said for this tipsy, lackadaisical warren.

'At least it doesn't form part of a decent, orderly, soul-destroying form of existence! No signs of the god of the everglaze chintz, and the everlasting afternoon tea—the plastic handbag and the brush-and-crumb tray; but above all, the *brush-and-crumb tray*!

'They're instructed in the pure high cunning of the

streets; and infected with the lighted café—disease of the century!

‘Isn’t that preferable to the other end of the stick—the blithering idiot, vaguely connected with the arts, who looks as though the Thames comes up to his knees every night! And feels more or less called upon to be snappy and on edge all the time!’

He knocked, and waited. Knocked: and waited like his predecessor in the cold middle of the day, and to the same monotonous percussion.

Taking hold of the handle, he broke in more softly than a cutpurse.

And remained there, in a dead stupor... looking about the little room under the splashy roof, so cold, submarine, and strangely lit as though the palette of some oriental pearl oyster looked in through every window.

‘She has changed her room for a better.’

He turned about and went downstairs. A spasm of utter despair overtook this fabrication of his, and nearly brought him to his knees. He trod as though entering a bottomless cavity.

Although it was only an instant since he passed up, the sounds of revelry had risen to a climax.

Doors now swung upon their hinges, and offered him scurrilous interiors... whose occupants lay full-length upon unmade beds, singing snatches of verse, embracing, drinking intoxicants, or scoffing and wolfing plates of fried food. It was a veritable workshop of itinerant musicians and sickly gigolos, grooming themselves with nail files and hair emulsions—sluggards, unimaginably vicious and wanton! The Young!

'Improvident blighters! What a stinking hell-hole this is!'

On the ground floor, he seized the handle of the Doctor's 'study' and glared in.

The Doctor bedded and quilted on the ottoman was puffing at a forbidden cigar. He removed it from his mouth, and smiled mysteriously.

For a moment Gerard was staggered.

He promptly flung himself on the Doctor like a tiger, and the wretched man was only able to save himself by opening his mouth, and with a ghastly gesture pointing at his lacerated tongue. His cigar rolled to the ground and lay smouldering in the hearth-rug.

Gerard pulled himself together and released his arch-enemy who fell back with a little gasp. And when he was able, sought with trembling hands for slate and pencil.

They communicated. Gerard standing over him with a set face, interlocuting with him with contracted heart. And the Doctor in a muck sweat, scratching away madly, anxious to appease him and darting glances at the door.

Gerard found the hideous little noise so grated on his tightly-strung nerves that he kept snatching up the slate and trying to make sense of the evil tidings that ran all over it in a sloping crack-brained script.

When his questions came to an end, he stood there dazed not knowing where to go.

'But how can I go on living...left alone in the black city, without my pale gold invalid.'

There are certain people with whom you can be yourself simply because you have so low an opinion of them

that in their company you are to all intents and purposes alone.

Knocked sideways by his thoughts, whey-pale, trembling, and with distorted features, Gerard remained irresolute in the centre of the room.

He thought of nothing but his grief. Liberated from bonds as light as those which bind the wings to Hermes' feet, his freedom at once rendered him vulnerable to the laws of gravity—and immediately restored to everything its exact weight and value! 'Is it only by cutting the tendons of the heart, that you are able to recover your perspective?'

On the other hand, the Doctor was wide awake! After a minute he stopped being afraid and opening his mouth like a fish with plimsoll lips. And subjected the interloper to a microscopic scrutiny.

Presently he ran a scoffing little wrinkle into his cheek. One would say it had been pinched from within by His Satanic Majesty.

He caressed this shattered neurotic.

Until quite suddenly he was seized with the desire to shake Gerard by the hand. Not in an access of friendly feeling, but just because he bore him a deep-seated grudge, and knew that Gerard would find it offensive to have to touch his flesh.

He brought up his right hand from the layers of bronze and purple quilts—these quilts looked as if they were as full of fleas and crumbs as the habit of a bird of prey—and stuck it out. And began to wave it about and importune him with it.

To see him at it you would have said his brain was softening, and that this filthy act of courtship was part

of his malady . . . indicative of a general worsening of his condition, and rapid onset of octogenarian babyhood.

If only he had done something wholesome, outright, damnable—hurled a sponge bag, or broken a plate—there might have been a chance of earning Gerard's respect. But these sheep's eyes, and this dubious overture!

Gerard turned round perfectly amazed and regarded the thing in all its gross impertinence. Supposing it had been exhumed and was covered with the eczemas of the grave, he could not have found it more extraordinary.

He bent upon it so cold an eye, one half expected the hand to freeze up and drop off.

Not a bit of it. Instead of slackening, and looking shame-faced, the Doctor redoubled his efforts. It was evident he set great store by this handshake.

He kept it up as though he was taking part in a battle of wills, and pinned all his hopes on the excelling power of a single gesture of good faith, to make a conquest of a highly dangerous individual who had just that moment snapped his reason, and was likely to lash out, to weep and scream and gnash his teeth demonically. But could be brought in, tame, by hand; and need not necessarily be hunted down, and have a sack thrown over his head before he was overpowered.

He succeeded in straining their relations to breaking point.

In the mounting tension he aroused in his antagonist a sensation of such extreme odium that merely to be in the same room with him brought up every hair upon his back . . . and he ended, by driving him from it!

Only then would he desist.

'I could not have done it better, no, not even by reading to him!'

And with a gloating, satirical face, he took to his slate.

He composed, as though he held an engraver's tool, or was scraping his name with many flourishes upon a table with a red stone top.

Later, when his wet-nurse came in, in dishabille, and bearing a little slice of cheesecake with the crust removed, he was snoozing peacefully, despite the rough-house upstairs and the smell of burning.

The slate was clasped to his stomach. You could see it had been written up and signed like an affidavit. While at the very bottom, heavily underlined, and not apparently connected with the foregoing matter appeared the triumphant conclusion: '*Adulterer!*'